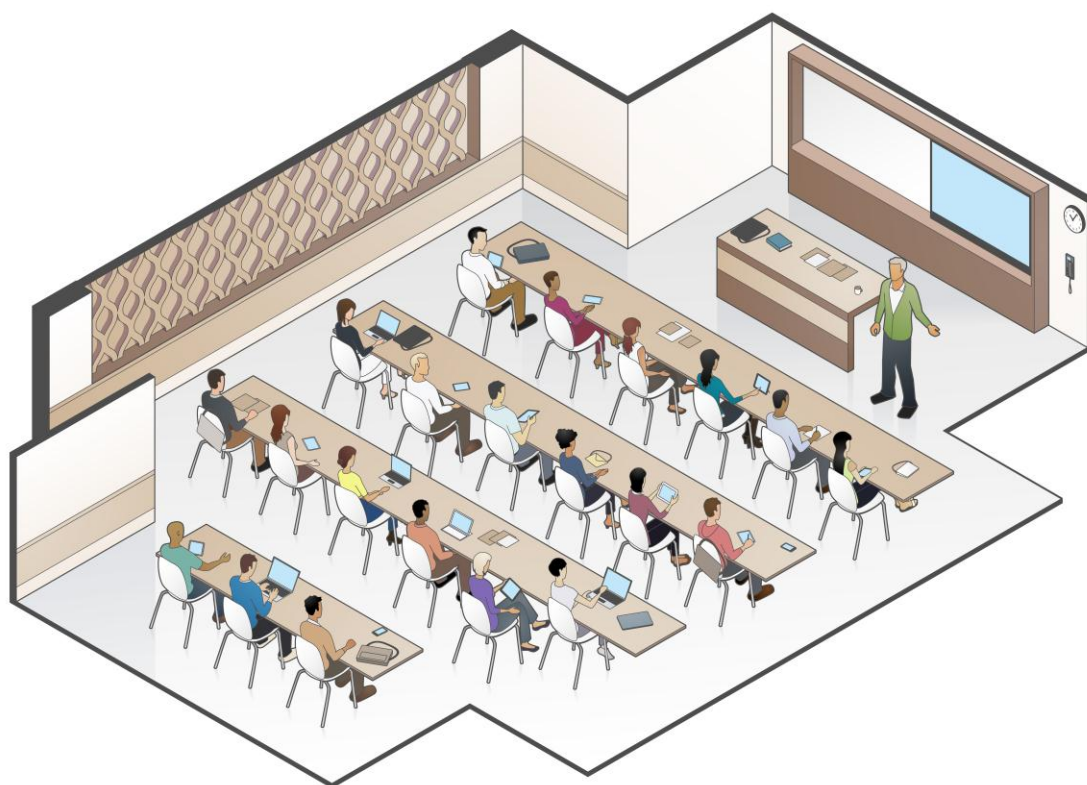


Inside Success:

Strategies of 25 Effective Small High Schools in NYC



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For many decades, New York City’s high school graduation rates hovered at or below 50 percent.ⁱ The City’s large comprehensive high schools, each typically enrolling more than 2,000 students, had earned a bad reputation as “dropout factories.”ⁱⁱ In response, the NYC Department of Education enacted a series of aggressive reforms—a centerpiece of which was the creation of hundreds of new “small schools of choice” (SSCs). A rigorous evaluation by MDRC has shown that these schools substantially improve graduation rates and other student outcomes. These benefits accrue for various student subgroups, including low-income students, students of color, English Language Learners, and special education students.

Our report, *Inside Success*, illuminates the perspectives of educators in 25 of the most successful SSCs. Based on interviews conducted with more than 100 teachers and principals in these schools, the paper answers questions about why and how they have been able to produce positive impacts for students, year after year. What decisions—made by the educators who created, supported, and operated these schools—have proved critical to their success? What challenges do these schools face as they try to maintain success over time?

Inside Success provides a rare and textured look at the work the SSCs we visited. We were able to meet with educators who had been at these schools since they opened, allowing us to learn about both the creation and ongoing operation of these highly effective SSCs. Our findings reveal the features of the SSC theory of action that educators see as most responsible for their school’s success; importantly, they also paint a picture of how these features have

MDRC’s Ongoing Evaluation of NYC’s Small Schools of Choice

The findings in this report serve as a precursor to additional analyses being undertaken by MDRC, to determine the extent to which various quantitative measures of the school learning environment can be linked to positive impacts on student performance and engagement, across a wide range of SSCs.

This ongoing work will draw on a survey the Research Alliance conducted, as well as the DOE’s annual citywide School Survey.

For more information about MDRC’s study, visit: www.mdrc.org/project/new-york-city-small-schools-choice-evaluation

been developed in practice. Major findings and recommendations from the full report are summarized on the following pages.

What features did principals and teachers see as most responsible for their schools' success?

To identify key success factors, we analyzed principals' and teachers' responses by two different criteria: 1) the frequency with which they reported these factors, and 2) the frequency with which they identified these factors *first* in response to an open-ended question about the features most responsible for their success. According to this analysis, three factors emerged as the most salient:ⁱⁱⁱ

- **Personalized Learning Environments.** Teachers and principals overwhelmingly identified personalization as a key—or as *the* key—to their school's success.

To develop personalized learning environments, SSCs created structures to foster strong relationships within the school community, forged connections with students' families, collected data that went beyond grades and test scores, and hired key support staff (e.g., social workers). Educators explained that these strategies promoted students' success primarily by preventing them from falling through the cracks and enabling teachers to provide supports to meet individual student needs. However, principals and teachers reported that, as schools grew over time, it was becoming more difficult to operate with the level of personalization they believed was responsible for their success.

- **Academic Expectations.** Interviewees cited the importance of teachers and principals having high expectations—both for their students and for one another.

The educators we spoke with emphasized focusing on each student's individual benchmarks and growth, creating an instructional program aligned with those goals, and conveying to students that, with support from the school, they can graduate and succeed in college or work. According to respondents, high expectations facilitated SSCs' success by providing clear objectives for school staff to work toward and prompting them to develop strategies for particular student sub-groups. At the same time, principals and teachers defined high expectations somewhat differently from school to school. Many were conflicted about how to reach their own benchmarks for success, while also meeting DOE accountability standards, particularly when students enter high school performing far below grade level.

- **Teachers.** Educators highlighted the importance of teachers' flexibility and willingness to take on multiple roles, sometimes outside their areas of expertise.

Given the small size of these schools, there are fewer staff to cover the range of subjects and the myriad tasks required. Thus, respondents explained, part of SSCs' success hinges on finding teachers who are talented, versatile, and willing to stretch themselves to fit their school's needs. Educators described specific recruitment and hiring practices that helped identify the best teachers for the job, such as committee-based hiring processes; interview practices that help determine which teacher candidates are the best match; and pipelines that bring strong candidates to their school. One of the reported tradeoffs for expecting teachers to regularly go "above and beyond" was teacher burnout. Principals, in particular, wondered if it was possible for staff to maintain the same level of energy they had exerted in their school's first few years.

What features of SSCs did principals and teachers see as less important to their success?

The theory of action behind SSCs highlighted two other features that were intended to buttress their effectiveness—a thematic focus and a supporting network. But, according to principals and teachers in the 25 SSCs we visited, neither of these features was critical to success. In response to an open-ended question about the factors most responsible for their school's strong outcomes, not one principal or teacher identified any topic related to the school's theme as being important. When we asked about themes specifically, educators at some schools reported advantages (e.g., helping attract students), but others said the theme had limited the curriculum in ways that were not helpful.

Schools' partnerships with networks were also viewed as relatively less important to these SSCs' success.^{iv} Since every SSC was planned and created in conjunction with an intermediary support organization, we anticipated that schools might attribute part of their success to the assistance these organizations provided. This did not turn out to be the case (though it is possible that intermediary organizations may have played a more prominent role during schools' startup years). Educators at a small number of schools did describe constructive, fruitful relationships with their networks. However, even in these schools, respondents rated the importance of their networks well below the core success factors described above.

Lessons for Schools and Districts

Based on SSCs' strong results, other schools and districts beyond New York City may be interested in adopting core elements of their approach. The Research Alliance's look inside these successful schools provides useful insights and lessons that can inform their efforts.

- **Create enduring structures that promote strong relationships with students and their families.** Small size alone is unlikely to produce such relationships.

A careful look inside successful SSCs highlights the fact that relationships are nurtured and strengthened by formal structures for staff and students to meet and discuss both academic and non-academic issues. Other schools can create similar structures by, for example, building smaller learning communities within larger schools, providing opportunities for teachers to lead student advisories, and establishing the expectation of regular communication with families. Given the inevitability of some teacher turnover, it is important to establish structures that will endure when leaders and teachers move on.

- **Establish more balanced work expectations over time.** Teachers' willingness to go above and beyond traditional instructional responsibilities runs the risk of burnout and turnover.

A careful look inside successful SSCs illuminates the importance of strategizing about how to retain teachers without compromising on the core values that enabled success. Schools need to temper the expectation that teachers will fill multiple roles and work tirelessly to support students. One of the SSCs provided a strong example of this approach by setting limits on how long teachers could stay after school and by intentionally hiring teachers with external commitments and responsibilities, as a way to create a more balanced work culture.

- **Improve the fit between schools and external partners.** Effective SSCs had a variety of external partners, but didn't see them as essential to their success.

A careful look inside successful SSCs reveals a general lack of enthusiasm about external partners relative to the emphasis placed on other success factors. Rather than concluding that external partners are not valuable, we suggest two other, related interpretations of this finding. First, external partners are not a substitute for school-based staff, such as the social workers and guidance counselors who SSC educators

said were central to creating effective personalized learning environments. Second, for external partners to make a difference, it is important that they be well integrated into the school community and address a compelling need that school staff aren't able to address on their own. When SSC partners were loosely related to the school's theme, for example, interviewees didn't find them especially useful. But when they helped provide a targeted service, especially around fostering student engagement and well-being, respondents were more likely to describe the partners as contributing to their effectiveness.

- **Value other dimensions of success (in addition to test scores and graduation rates), at the school and district level.** Effective SSCs emphasize a “whole child” approach to education, including students' social and emotional well-being.

A careful look inside successful SSCs offers insight into the potential for expanding current notions of accountability and what it means to be a successful or high-performing school. Respondents were critical of policies that pressured them to “push” kids through to graduation and college before they are ready. They talked about defining success differently for different students (including some who may need six years to graduate), providing students with critical life skills that might not show up on a standardized test, and preventing negative life outcomes, such as early pregnancy or incarceration. These educators also highlighted the importance of collecting a broad range of student data—on attendance, social and emotional well-being, coursework, etc.—to improve and differentiate instruction, track students' progress in real time, and intervene when necessary. The experience of these SSCs seems to call for creating additional measures of success at the district level—for example, by using school surveys to capture more kinds of information about students' experiences in schools.

The findings presented above are part of an ongoing study that will continue to assess the impact of SSCs and examine the keys to their success. MDRC's next report will provide a systematic analysis of the extent to which variations in SSC's effects on students can be tied directly to some of the features examined in this report.

Looking forward, the strategies gleaned from principals and teachers and described here may represent critical steps toward sustaining and building on the gains these schools have made and possibly replicating their success. Our hope is that these

findings might be used by a range of educators and policymakers here in NYC and other urban areas, as they work to improve high schools and produce better outcomes for youth.

Executive Summary Notes

ⁱ For information about New York City graduation rate trends prior to 1999, see New York City Department of Education (2012). “New York City Graduation Rates, Class of 2011 (2007 Cohort).” For information on graduation rates across the country, see Chapman et al. (2010).

ⁱⁱ For an overview of the dropout crisis in the U.S., see Balfanz & Legters (2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ Principal leadership emerged as an important success factor as well, but we decided not to report on this topic

separately, in favor of highlighting how leadership played a critical role in the other three key factors.

^{iv} Each NYC school belongs to a network of approximately 20 schools. The network teams “support schools in meeting all of their instructional and operational needs while ensuring that schools can reach their accountability targets.” See <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/410CD054-2B4F-496B-AFF1-E84D7D4A297C/0/EmpowermentSchoolsbrochure.pdf>.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

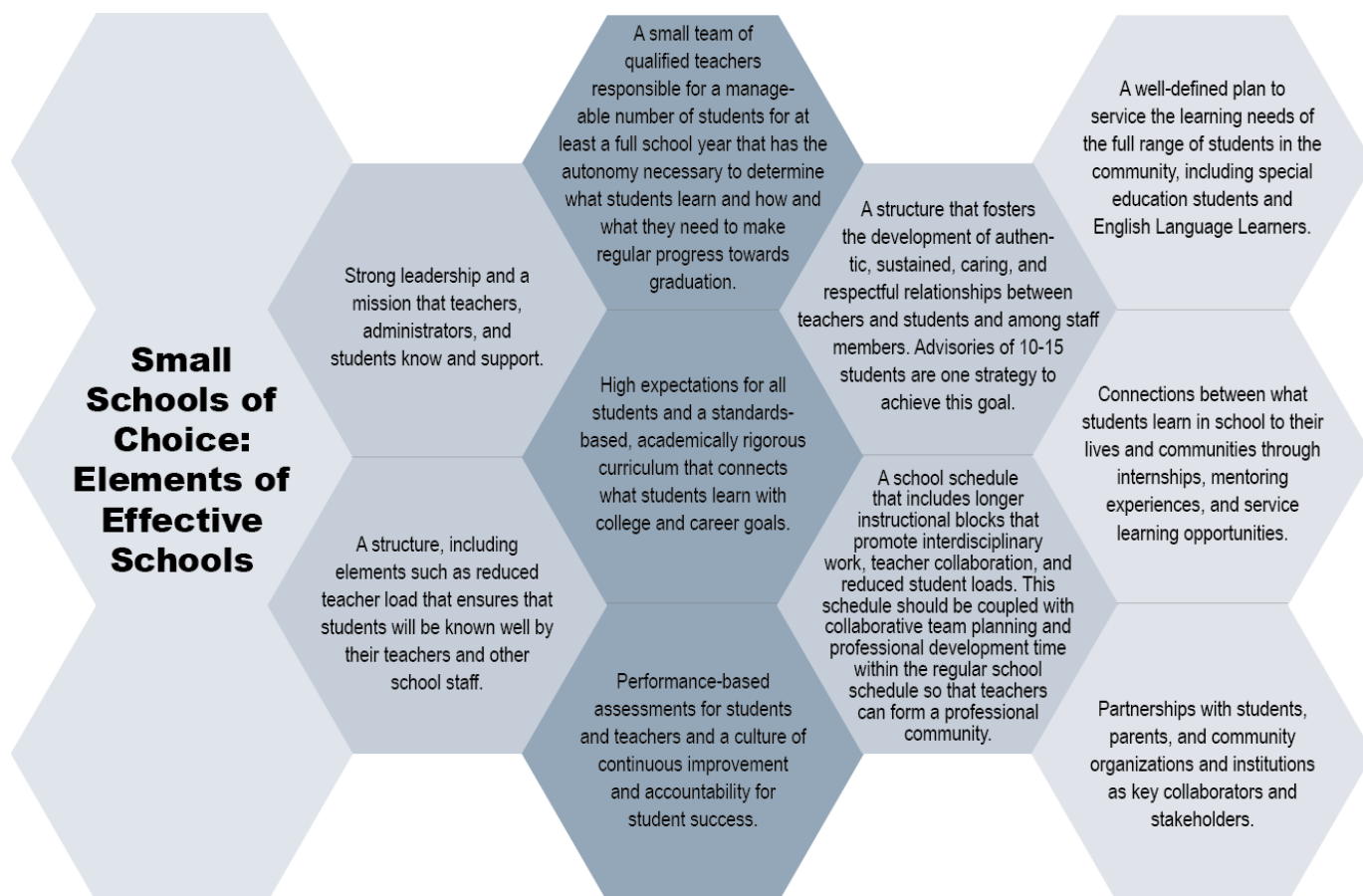
For decades, New York City’s high school graduation rate remained at or below 50 percent.¹ In particular, many of NYC’s large comprehensive high schools, each typically enrolling more than 2,000 students, had earned a national reputation as “dropout factories.”² In an effort to improve the City’s high schools, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) embarked on a multi-pronged reform effort that included phasing out persistently low-achieving high schools, replacing them with smaller schools, and creating a choice-based high school application and student assignment process. Between 1999 and 2010, the DOE closed 40 underperforming high schools and opened more than 250 new high schools (Kemple, 2013). The fastest growth occurred between 2002 and 2006, when more than 150 new high schools were launched. Most of these schools were small (serving 110 or fewer new 9th graders per year), academically nonselective, and open to students residing anywhere in the city. For the purposes of this report, we refer to these schools as “small schools of choice” or SSCs.

New York City’s small schools initiative is the largest systemic reform of urban high schools in the country and one of only a few to be subjected to a rigorous, independent assessment of impacts on student engagement and performance. Since 2008, MDRC has been conducting a unique evaluation of SSC impacts, which compares the outcomes of students who were randomly selected to attend a given SSC (through the City’s school choice process), against a control group of similar students who applied to the same SSC but were not selected to enroll (Bloom et al. 2010; Bloom & Unterman 2011; Bloom & Unterman 2013; Bloom & Unterman 2014).³ MDRC found that—across a range of outcomes, including attendance, Regents exam scores, and graduation rates—students at SSCs consistently outperformed members of the control group.⁴

These findings indicate that SSCs, on the whole, are indeed more effective than other NYC high schools, for the students who opt to attend them. But many important questions remain about why and how these results were achieved: Why have these schools been successful? What decisions—made by the educators who created, supported, and operated these schools—proved critical to their success? What challenges do these schools face as they try to maintain success over time?

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools is collaborating with MDRC to begin to answer these questions. In the spring of 2011, the Research Alliance conducted in-depth interviews with principals and a sample of teachers in 25 SSCs that had particularly robust, positive impacts on student outcomes. The interviews focused on aspects of the SSC theory of action (outlined in Figure 1 below), including, but not limited to, the school's personalized learning environment and the expectations that principals and teachers have for one another and for their students. Through these conversations, we learned which of these features educators saw as most responsible for their school's effectiveness—and, importantly, how these features were being developed in practice. Our interviews also surfaced other opportunities and challenges that schools have faced and that may impact their ability to sustain their results over the long term.

Figure 1: “The Elements of Effective Schools,” from the NYC Department of Education’s Application for New Secondary Schools, 2008



Source: NYC Department of Education, *New Secondary School Application: 2008 Edition*. Originally cited in Bloom et al. (2010).

The Research Alliance also administered a survey, in 2012, to teachers in 89 SSCs in the City, to collect more systematic data about the success factors that educators reported in our interviews. MDRC is currently conducting analyses, drawing on findings from the survey (as well as the DOE's annual citywide School Survey), to determine if various quantitative measures of the learning environment can be linked to positive impacts on student engagement and performance. These results will be released by MDRC in 2015 and may offer the most compelling evidence yet about the conditions necessary for SSCs to succeed.

This paper serves as a precursor to those analyses, illuminating the perspectives of SSC teachers and principals. Our interviews and focus groups provided a rare and textured look inside the work of 25 highly effective schools. Chapter 2 describes the sample, data collection process, and analytic methods we used to arrive at our findings. Chapter 3 presents a summary of the SSC features that principals and teachers identified as most responsible for their success. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 offer a more detailed discussion of the key success factors, as well as the accompanying challenges that staff faced, both during start-up and as they have tried to sustain their progress. Chapter 7 considers the implications of these findings for policy, practice, and further research.

As schools in NYC and around the country work to improve outcomes for their students, the lessons emerging from SSCs are important. The strategies principals and teachers describe in this report may represent critical steps toward replicating the SSCs' success. Their insights also suggest factors that will require attention if SSCs are to sustain and perhaps even build on the gains they have made.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODS

The primary goal of our study was to capture teachers' and principals' perspectives on why their SSCs have been effective at raising student engagement and performance. Central to the study's design was the selection of schools that have robust evidence of their positive impact on student outcomes. The first section of this chapter describes the criteria used to select a sample of 25 such schools as well as the process for identifying teachers within these schools to participate in focus group interviews.

The rest of the chapter focuses on our data collection and analytic strategies. In-depth interviews with educators can yield an authentic and nuanced view of the complex structural and interpersonal factors that may enhance or limit effective teaching and learning in schools. This study's data collection protocols and analysis strategies were designed to generate credible evidence of factors that were seen by teachers and principals as important contributors to (or detractors from) their schools' effectiveness. Our methods aimed to shed light on factors that were sufficiently prevalent across effective schools to suggest some direction for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers about how to design and implement successful school environments. Thus, the final section of the chapter discusses important issues that should guide the interpretation of our findings.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

The goal of the fieldwork we conducted was to learn as much as possible from talking to principals and teachers at a subset of "highly effective" SSCs. To that end, MDRC identified the 30 SSCs (out of the 110 in their study) that had the largest or most statistically significant positive estimates of effects on 9th graders' progress toward graduation during the two most recent school years for which data were available at the time (2008-2009 and 2009-2010). This analysis focused on a key student outcome: whether a student was on-track for graduation at the end of 9th grade (Bloom & Unterman 2013). As with MDRC's prior SSC impact analysis, these estimates were generated from a naturally occurring randomized controlled trial, in which students were selected to attend a school of their choosing through a lottery-like process. Students who had applied but were not selected to attend an SSC were used to create a control group. There were no systematic differences, on average, in the background characteristics or prior achievement of the two groups, meaning any differences that emerged in outcomes could be attributed to the SSCs. Thus, MDRC's

analysis yielded valid estimates of the impacts that the SSCs had on student outcomes. For the purposes of this paper, we refer to the 30 schools identified by MDRC as “highly effective SSCs.” (See Table 1 on the next page for a look at how these schools compare to other SSCs and to NYC high schools on average.)

Between March and May of 2011, Research Alliance staff attempted to secure agreement from all 30 schools that they would participate in the study. The recruitment process occurred in three overlapping and iterative stages. We started by emailing leaders of each school support network that served one or more of the 30 schools.⁵ In this initial email, Research Alliance staff provided a general overview of the study and requested an opportunity to interview the schools’ principal and selected teachers (see Appendix A for sample recruitment letters). We arranged a telephone meeting with the network leader, during which we addressed their questions about the study and asked them to encourage principals at the relevant schools to participate.

At the same time, we contacted the principal of each of the 30 schools directly through email and follow up phone calls. Our goal was to arrange a meeting with each principal to discuss the study and to obtain their consent for the school’s participation.⁶ In most cases, after learning more about the study, principals agreed to participate by email or phone. In a few cases, a Research Alliance staff member visited a school principal in person. Ultimately, 25 of the 30 schools identified by MDRC agreed to participate in our interviews. Two schools declined to participate, citing lack of time as the primary reason, and three did not respond to multiple requests for meetings to discuss the study and gain consent.

Once principals agreed to have their school participate, we asked them to identify three to five teachers for our team to interview. In an attempt to meet teachers from whom we could learn the most about the school’s creation and operation, we requested those who had been teaching in the school since it was first opened or who had worked at the school for at least three years. In 14 of the 25 schools, focus groups contained one teacher who had been in the school since it opened. Among all the teachers we spoke with, the average length of time in their school was between five and six years.

Table 1: Characteristics of the 25 Fieldwork Small Schools of Choice, All SSCs, and All Other NYC DOE High Schools in 2010-2011

	Fieldwork SSCs	All SSCs	All Other NYC DOE High Schools
Student Characteristics			
Race/Ethnicity			
Hispanic	50.0	48.4	42.4
Black	44.1	44.5	35.8
White	2.4	3.3	9.9
Asian	2.7	3.3	11.4
Other	0.8	0.5	0.5
Male	53.4	50.9	49.2
Eligible for free/reduced-price lunch	86.0	78.2	78.6
Special education	18.7	17.6	14.1
English Language Learner	9.1	12.4	13.8
Overage for 8 th grade ^a	30.5	28.6	22.1
Scored below grade level on 8 th -grade reading test ^b	77.4	78.0	65.0
Scored below grade level on 8 th -grade math test ^c	68.9	70.9	55.0
Teacher characteristics (%)			
Teachers with less than 3 years of experience	9.1	9.2	9.8
Teachers with a master's plus a certificate	38.9	34.2	44.0
Teachers teaching out of their certification	11.1	10.3	10.7
Teacher turnover rate ^d	23.2	21.7	20.4
School characteristics			
Total school enrollment	426	389	891
Average 10 th -grade class size ^e	28	27	28
Borough (%)			
Bronx	54.2	44.0	21.6
Brooklyn	33.3	33.9	26.9
Manhattan	8.3	14.7	28.1
Queens	4.2	6.4	20.6
Staten Island	0.0	0.9	2.8
School age as of 2011 (%)			
1-3 years	0.0	0.0	0.0
4 years	0.0	10.3	2.4
5 years	0.0	9.3	5.6
6 years	12.5	17.8	4.4
7 years	45.8	41.1	6.3
8 years	41.7	15.9	6.3
9 or more years	0.0	5.6	75.0
Number of Schools	25	110	320

Table Source: Bloom & Unterman (2013).

See page 57 for original data sources and complete table notes.

Finally, we arranged to interview the principal at each of the 25 participating schools. In 16 of the schools, the principal had been working there since it opened. The other principals had joined their school anywhere from its second to its sixth year of operation. In two cases, we interviewed the founding principal instead of the current one.

Data Collection

Our fieldwork took place over a two-month period in the spring of 2011. Data collection involved one 60-minute interview with each principal and one 45-minute focus group with three to five teachers in each of the 25 schools. Each interview and focus group was recorded in full and transcribed verbatim into digital text files.

The research team developed semi-structured interview protocols with three overarching goals (see Appendices B and C for the protocols).⁷ First, we sought to allow the principals and teachers to generate their own hypotheses and observations about factors that they believed accounted for their school's success. Thus, the principal interview protocol began with several open-ended questions about the respondent's overall impression of the school, including characteristics that make it distinctive, what it is like to work in the school, and how they gauge success. The opening sets of questions in both interview protocols also asked the principals and teachers to list the two or three most important factors that are responsible for the school's success. This included probes for specific examples or descriptions of the success factors they identified.

The second goal in constructing the interview protocols was to probe for information about specific elements reflected in the small schools' theory of action.⁸ For instance, the principal interview protocol included questions about human resources, the learning environment, and community partnerships. The teacher protocol prompted teachers to comment on the four core elements of the theory of action (personalization, academic expectations, theme, and external partnerships), which were listed on a small standing placard.

The third goal embedded in the interview protocols was to collect information about challenges, both to overall school functioning and to the specific success factors identified throughout the interview. This portion included questions about difficulties during the initial establishment of the schools as well as challenges to long-term sustainability.

At the end of each interview and focus group, the protocol prompted educators to affirm or change their initial list of success factors. This allowed the principals and teachers to reflect further on the prominence and relative importance of both their own hypotheses and the specific factors that were presented to them later in the interview.

Data Analysis

To maximize the reliability and credibility of the findings, we undertook a very close analysis of verbatim transcript data from our interviews. Our process included reflective writing, coding, analytic writing, and critical discussion among the analysis team, which consisted of two senior researchers and two junior research analysts. Each team member participated in at least five principal interviews and five teacher focus groups and contributed to each phase of the data analysis. The senior researchers established the initial structure for the reflection memos and coding scheme.

The following description outlines four distinct components of the analytic process. It is important to note that these components overlapped and interacted with each other over a period of several months. In the end, the findings that emerged from this process offer a rigorous and systematic synthesis of the most prevalent and salient factors reported by the respondents as important to the SSCs' success, as well as rich and nuanced descriptions of how these factors worked together and evolved in specific school contexts.

Reflection memos. Immediately after each school visit, the researcher who conducted the fieldwork completed a *reflection memo* summarizing key themes that she or he felt were most prevalent from the principal interview and teacher focus group. The reflection memos were organized around the questions listed in the interview protocols (see Appendices D and E for our reflection memo templates). The memos also included observations about the overall quality of the interviews and about any problems that may have occurred during the school visit.

Analytic memos. After reading across reflection memos to generate a list of broad and recurring themes, patterns, or statements, both within specific categories and according to respondent type (e.g., Principal-Challenges, Teachers-Professional Culture), the research team generated a series of *analytic memos*, which synthesized key themes and observations. The purpose of these memos was to help form preliminary hypotheses about the most prevalent themes and create a list of codes that

would be used to label and organize the transcript data into categories related to our research questions.

Coding and cross-validating. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, so that we could conduct a close analysis of each interview through *coding*. First, at least two members of the research team independently coded the same two transcripts by hand to examine our code list for variations, gaps, and redundancies. To verify inter-rater reliability and further refine our codes, each of these sample transcripts was coded by at least two researchers (Strauss & Corbin 1990); their results were compared for both accuracy, based on the intent of the code, and consistency across the two coders. We then examined data elements that were coded incorrectly or inconsistently, to determine whether to change the code or further clarify the proposed coding criteria. We repeated this process a total of three times before finalizing our codes and using ATLAS.ti software to code the rest of the transcripts. Examining the data multiple times from different perspectives helped ensure that our research team remained open to noticing conflicting data and developing new insights (Hatch 2002). The final list included a total of 45 codes (see Appendix F). For codes that were used frequently (e.g., Success-Personalization), researchers created a list of exploratory questions to make codes attached to large amounts of data less unwieldy (e.g., How did schools promote personalization? Why did personalization matter?). The team could then organize coded transcript data into these sub-categories. (The creation of exploratory questions for our data-rich codes could also be seen as an exercise in sub-coding.)

Thematic outlines and narratives. After several rounds of review and discussion of the coded transcripts, we created a spreadsheet to track how often the codes came up in interviews and focus groups at each school. The purpose of this exercise was to further clarify the prevalence of different codes and patterns within and across respondent types. The most senior research team member then created a preliminary *thematic outline*, which captured the three success factors that appeared most frequently in the transcripts—personalization, academic expectations, and teacher characteristics—as well as the exploratory questions we had developed. Chapter 3 in this paper presents more information about how we identified these three factors as the most prevalent and salient. The team went on to create *narratives* related to each of the sub-sections in the outline. The narratives described the contexts within which these success factors were discussed, differences in how each factor was described by various respondents, and issues that were identified as challenges either during the early implementation period or for long-term sustainability. These thematic narratives

included a selection of quotes from the interviews to illustrate the issues under discussion. The outline, along with the narratives and corresponding quotes, became the basis for this report.

Further Context for Interpreting the Findings

The findings presented in the next four chapters should be interpreted with several important features of the study in mind. First, the participating schools, principals, and teachers are not necessarily representative of all new small schools in New York City. As described above, the schools were selected based on robust estimates of their impact on key student outcomes. The participating principals and teachers were informed that their school had been chosen based on evidence of its effectiveness. It is possible that this influenced respondents to be more positive about their school. However, even though MDRC's evidence show that their students were better off than they would have been had they attended other schools that were available to them, the overall performance of these schools may have been on par with or in some cases, lower compared to citywide averages or to their peer schools. Many of the principals and teachers gauged their success, at least in part, on the basis of data provided by the DOE, rather than the type of evidence generated by MDRC. Thus, they may not have viewed their schools as the "highest performers." Also, while many of the respondents felt that their schools were generally effective, they also offered critical assessments of their progress and noted that more needed to be done to ensure success for all students.

The principals leading these small schools may also be distinctive, given the fact that most were integral players in both the start-up and ongoing operation of the schools and, according to the teachers we interviewed, important contributors to their success. Similarly, the teachers were selected by their principals and may present atypical perspectives on their schools, in light of the role many played in the start-up process. In particular, their leadership role and commitment to their school may have inhibited some of the respondents from reporting on areas of weakness. That said, the interview data reflect a wide range of both positive and critical perspectives on these schools. The sampling frame is consistent with the goals of the study, which was designed explicitly to gain the perspectives of those most likely to be knowledgeable about operations, opportunities and challenges of leading and working in successful small schools of choice.

Second, the primary sources of information for this study were building-level practitioners. We did not interview district staff or external support organizations. SSC principals and teachers may have been more inclined to highlight the importance of their own in-house efforts and less focused on the potentially influential role of the district and external partners. While the protocols included direct questions about external partners, there may be gaps in the evidence about their role, since we did not elicit the perspective of these organizations.

Finally, it is important keep in mind that the design and execution of this study does not provide a basis for establishing a valid causal link between the success factors identified by educators and the positive impacts the schools have had on student outcomes. For example, it is possible that principals and teachers in other, less successful SSCs also see themselves as providing a highly personalized and demanding learning environment for students. If personalization and high expectations are important features of both effective and less effective schools, then it is likely that they are not sufficient in explaining the success of SSCs. At this point, we cannot say whether the conditions identified by educators in SSCs also exist in other schools.

Still, this study can inform future policies, practice and research by documenting factors that are leading candidates for explaining SSC effectiveness, from the perspective of those who are likely to be most knowledgeable about them. In fact, MDRC's evaluation of SSCs is ongoing and will build on this study with a more systematic investigation of the causal mechanisms that may explain the strong positive impacts found so far. This will be done using teacher survey data from both SSCs and other schools across New York City. Their analysis will assess variation in school environments as reported on the survey—including personalization, expectations and teacher characteristics—and will examine how these differences relate to variation in estimated impacts on student outcomes. The current study informed this next stage of MDRC's work in two ways. First, our findings in the field guided the construction of the survey instrument itself. And second, our findings provide a context by which to interpret the survey results, allowing for a richer and more nuanced understanding of the survey measures.

CHAPTER 3: WHAT FEATURES DID EDUCATORS SEE AS MOST RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR SCHOOL’S SUCCESS?

Teachers and principals in the 25 effective SSCs most frequently cited—and described in the greatest detail—three core factors that they viewed as essential to their school’s success:

- A personalized environment,
- High academic expectations, and
- The school’s hiring process and teaching staff.

Subsequent chapters of this report explore each of the three key success factors in more detail. This chapter describes our process for determining that these were the most prominent and salient factors, from the perspectives of principals and teachers. It also discusses other aspects of SSCs that respondents said contributed to their success, but that they mentioned less frequently and, generally speaking, in less depth than the three most prominent success factors. Lastly, we identify two features of schools—their theme and their work with their support network—which were either notably absent from educators’ responses or were described as being of little, no, or negative consequence to their success.

How did we determine success factors?

The primary criterion we used to identify the prominent and salient success factors was the frequency with which they were reported across all of the schools and all of the interviews. We should note that principals’ leadership was also frequently cited as critical to success, yet we decided not to devote a separate chapter to this topic, because the role of the principal was discussed primarily in connection with one of the three other success factors. Educators often highlighted aspects of their principals’ leadership that were directly related to creating their schools’ personalized environments, setting high academic expectations in the building, and establishing creative hiring practices to secure a strong teaching staff. We believe it will be most useful to describe these principal-led strategies in the context of the other success factors.

Table 2 below presents two of the tabulations we used to determine the prominence and salience of the success factors. The first tabulation—in the top panel—depicts

the frequency with which teachers and principals identified each of the three broad features mentioned above, throughout the entire interview.⁹ The second panel presents the frequency with which they identified each of these features *first* when responding to the open-ended question: “Of all the things that contribute to making a school work, what are the two or three factors that you think are most responsible for this school’s successes?” Note that we did not ask interviewees to list the factors in order of priority.

Table 2 reflects several important patterns. First, teachers and principals identified personalized environments as being the feature most responsible for their schools’ success, citing it more frequently than any of the other broad categories. Second, teachers and, to a lesser extent, principals often highlighted the importance of personalized environments *first* when responding to our open-ended question. Teachers in 13 of the 25 focus groups highlighted personalization as critical to their school’s success, before going on to describe other features that they believe also play a role. Principals were more evenly split, with six mentioning the importance of personalized environments first and seven mentioning the role that teachers play. While high academic expectations were generally not mentioned first by either group, they were cited by a critical mass of principals and teachers as important to the success of the school.

What other factors did principals and teachers mention?

Educators identified many other aspects of their school as contributing to their success, including the school’s relationships with external partners (e.g., community-based organizations or higher education institutions); professional development for teachers; the use of data to inform instruction; the curriculum and instructional

Table 2: The Frequency and Order of Features Reported as Most Responsible for Schools’ Success

	Personalization	Teachers	Academic Expectations
Total number of times respondents identified these factors			
Teachers ^a	22	11	10
Principals ^b	17	11	5
Number of times that respondents identified each of these features <i>first</i>			
Teachers ^a	13	2	1
Principals ^b	6	7	1

Source: Data collected and analyzed by the Research Alliance for New York City Schools.

Notes: ^a. n=25 focus groups of 3-5 teachers; 75 teachers total. ^b. n=25 (24 principals and one assistant principal).

program; and the school's financial stability and resources of various types. While important, especially to particular schools, none of these features emerged across the 25 schools with the regularity or depth of the top three success factors. In addition, respondents generally mentioned these other characteristics after describing the importance of one or several of the aforementioned factors.

Of all the features that educators thought had played a role in their success, the one that varied the most across SSCs was the relationship with external partners. In three schools, educators said that external partners had contributed substantially to their success; however, even in these schools, respondents did not rank the importance of external partners on par with other features, such as personalized environments. And a small handful of schools described having either no relationships with external partners or relationships that were so limited that they were barely worth sustaining. Still, some educators' descriptions of how external partners enhanced students' learning in their school provided compelling evidence that these partnerships, when they work, can be tremendously powerful, though not necessarily in the ways hypothesized by the SSC theory of action.

What features of schools were notably absent in educators' testimony?

The theory of action behind SSCs noted two other features that were intended to support their success—a thematic focus and a supporting network (formerly referred to by the DOE as “intermediary organizations”). According to principals and teachers in these 25 SSCs, neither of these features was critical to their school's success. In response to our open-ended question about the factors most responsible for their success, not one principal or teacher identified any topic related to schools' theme as being important. And when we asked a subsequent series of questions focused specifically on themes, respondents described complicated pros and cons. For instance, some schools reported that their narrow theme made it challenging to design a curriculum with enough breadth that it prepared students to succeed in college. For other schools, the thematic focus had helped brand the school, making it easier to differentiate themselves and attract students.

Schools' partnerships with networks were also seen as relatively unimportant to these SSCs' success. Since every SSC was planned and created in conjunction with an intermediary support organization, we anticipated that schools might attribute part of their success to the support these organizations provide. We found that a small number of schools described constructive, fruitful relationships with their networks.

However, even in these schools, respondents rated the importance of their networks well below the factors described above. Since this wasn't the focus of our study, we did not spend time probing for why these networks were not viewed as essential to schools' success. It may be that these intermediaries and networks played a more prominent role during schools' startup years than they did at the time of our data collection, and not all of the staff we interviewed could speak to that period in their school's history. However, 18 of the 25 principals *were* present during their schools' first two years, and half of the teacher focus groups included at least one teacher who had been at the school since its inception. For this reason, we believe there was ample opportunity for interviewees to speak to the role of intermediaries during startup, yet they generally did not.

Summary

Based on our analysis of both the frequency with which educators reported various success factors and the frequency with which they identified these factors *first*, three factors emerged as most important to these SSC's success: a personalized environment, high academic expectations, and high-quality teachers. Interestingly, educators did not cite their school theme or their support network as often as expected, considering these were two hallmarks of the SSC model.

The following three chapters will delve more deeply into each of the core success factors. While frequency was part of the criteria for selecting these factors, the specific strategies we report in the next chapters were not necessarily in evidence across all or even most of the 25 schools. However, we believe it is valuable to describe a wide breadth of these strategies, to illustrate how the success factors may play out in different school contexts.

CHAPTER 4: PERSONALIZATION

Teachers and principals overwhelmingly identified their schools' personalization as a key to their success. A large body of existing research describes what personalization is intended to accomplish in small schools; however, there is less empirical research about what personalization actually looks like in practice. Thus, we begin this chapter by describing the ways in which principals and teachers created and developed personalized environments in their schools, to give readers a better sense of what interviewees meant by "personalization." We heard a great deal about the creation of trusting relationships between teachers and students and between school staff and students' families. Many educators also described personalization as a dual focus on students' academic development *and* their social and emotional health and well-being or, as some respondents put it, a "whole child" focus. The chapter goes on to describe staff's perspectives on how personalized environments contribute to student success in these schools. Finally, we explore some of the challenges associated with maintaining a strong level of personalization, particularly as small schools get larger or begin to serve more high-need students over time.

What does personalization look like in practice?

According to the educators we spoke with, personalized environments are characterized by specific structures that routinely bring together teachers, administrators, and guidance staff to discuss students' progress and well-being. More specifically, respondents identified two types of structures that were critical for functional personalized environments and, thus, their schools' success: student advisory groups and grade-level teams. The other steps that teachers and administrators took to establish personalized environments included designing systems for monitoring students' progress, hiring support staff such as guidance counselors and social workers, and maintaining regular contact with students' parents. Below, we examine each of these steps in greater detail.

Structures that Focus on Small Groups of Students

Respondents reported that two structures—student advisory groups and grade-level teams—were at the core of their school's personalized environment. In student advisories, teachers meet regularly with a small group of students to support them in whatever way is needed; in grade-level teams, school staff work together to identify struggling students and develop appropriate interventions. Although some of the

particulars differed, these structures were omnipresent across the 25 SSCs in our sample, and their basic functions were consistent.

Student advisory groups are designed to establish relationships between teachers and students and provide support for students—be it social, emotional, or academic. In practice, advisory groups consist of one teacher and 10-20 students who meet at a regularly scheduled time. There were many models of advisory groups in our sample of effective SSCs. At Leadership, for instance, advisory groups met four times per week, for 45 minutes each session.¹⁰ To foster close-knit relationships, advisors at Leadership met with the same group of students for four years. West and Plainview followed this same model, though Plainview's advisory groups met only once or twice per week depending on students' grade. By contrast, at Constitution, advisory groups met three times per week, and both the students in an advisory and the teachers with whom students were paired changed annually. Staff at Constitution told us they found the annual rotation preferable, as it allowed them to separate students who didn't get along, if necessary, and created opportunities to pair students with a teacher who worked with their current grade level.

Advisory groups in SSCs also differed in terms of the students that they served. The most common model involved some type of advisory for students in all four grades. However, some schools' advisory groups served only students in particular grades and/or particular sub-groups of students. For instance, at Community, advisory groups were established in students' senior year and served only those students who were at risk for not graduating. At Channel Bay, advisory groups served all students in all grades, but male and female students were separated and paired with a teacher of the same gender.

Interviewees' descriptions of the advisory groups in their schools illustrated the range of supports that this structure can provide. For instance, at Memorial, as was the case in many schools, the advisory groups were designed to provide teachers and students with an informal opportunity to discuss students' academic progress. The groups offered a space where students could say, "I'm not doing so well this week," and then discuss how to get back on track with a teacher and supportive group of peers. The assistant principal at Plainview noted that their advisory groups addressed students' immediate social needs and struggles, as well as bigger-picture, long-term matters, such as setting goals beyond high school and discussing the pros and cons of different careers. The principal at Constitution explained that his school's advisory groups also

discussed summer opportunities, college options, and various related nuts-and-bolts topics, such as how to prepare a strong college application.

Grade-level teams were the other structure that educators described as critical for a functional personalized environment. In grade-level teams, teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, social workers, and other staff discuss students' progress, identify struggling students, and develop interventions for getting these students back on track. The principal at Valley described the work and objective of these teams as follows:

So every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday during the kids' lunchtime, we meet by grade level. Teachers [are there], the guidance staff is there every day, I'm there all four days, the dean is there all four days. There [are] about 15 to 20 people in the room, depending on the grade. We start the meeting off by doing follow-ups [for] kids we talked about two weeks previously to see if the interventions we put in place are working. If not, what we can change? And then we have a list of new names of kids who teachers are worried about. We get through three or four kids a week. There's a form that we fill out on the SMART Board [that lists] data on the student, goals, the intervention, the follow-up.¹¹ And so, the whole team talks about the students and the interventions... and what they think is going to work to get the kids back on track.

Like advisory groups, grade-level teams met regularly at the SSCs in our study, though the frequency ranged from one to four times a week. The length of each meeting varied across schools as well.

We should note that principals prioritized these structures and protected teacher time so student advisories and grade-level meetings could be implemented. When describing the specific steps behind the creation of functional personalized environments, respondents emphasized the importance of making these structures a regular, formal part of schools' schedules. While this seems an obvious point, schools have historically struggled to foster meaningful collaboration, and teachers and administrators alike routinely point to their schedule as the primary obstacle to working together more closely. By contrast, SSC principals deliberately created structures that promoted collaboration and functional personalized environments.

Many principals in our sample described using creative scheduling techniques to make these meetings possible. Springside and Plainview relied, in part, on shorter classes one day a week to free up time for structured meetings. At East and Rockford, these

creative techniques hinged on the scheduling of students' gym period. Rockford's principal explained:

I think a lot of people who don't work in schools would be surprised at how complicated it is for teachers to meet because they think, 'Oh, you have so much time,' but it's not [easy]. So we have a structure in place where half the kids take gym in the morning, and the other half doesn't start school until 9:15am, so between 8:30 a.m. and 9:15 a.m., all the teachers are in the building, but they don't teach, with the exception of the gym class and maybe, like, a resource room. So, pretty much, 95 percent of the faculty doesn't teach between 8:30 a.m. and 9:15 a.m., so we have all this time for meetings. We have a schedule, so sometimes the meetings are for the content teachers and the advisors of the kids of those content teachers, sometimes they're department [meetings], sometimes grade[-level meetings], and sometimes it's the whole entire faculty.

At West and Valley high schools, formalizing time for various teacher and staff meetings required freeing teachers up from lunch duties and coordinating students' schedules so that students in the same grade were at lunch at the same time. More important than the details of the creative scheduling is the fact that principals made a priority of protecting meeting times in schools' formal schedules.

Relationships with Students' Families

Common across many of our interviews were descriptions of efforts to build genuine relationships with students' parents and families, rather than just communicating with them. For instance, a teacher at Better Way high school observed, "When the parents are working with you, collaboratively, and you are working as stakeholders in the welfare of their children, it definitely helps you." The principal at Channel Bay offered a similar observation, noting:

Another [factor responsible for our school's success] is working with the parents together. Because it isn't just the teachers, it's really working with parents as partners... And helping kids to see that we're all on the same page, you know, that we're all here for the same thing... We're all here to help a child to be successful... I meet with their parents, and talk with them, and say, 'This is what we're expecting. What do you expect from us? We're going to be here for you if you're not successful,' you know? I think communicating that is important.

The principal at East described constructive relationships with parents as being the “third side of the triangle” that SSCs need to establish in order to facilitate students’ success (the school and the students form the other two sides). The SSCs implemented different strategies to develop these relationships with parents, including hiring a social worker to work with families, creating “attendance teams” who called and visited homes when a student was absent, and using online grading systems to keep parents informed of their child’s progress. Educators reported that having parents as partners is important because it communicates to students that they have two sets of adults who are committed to seeing them succeed.

Support Staff

Educators repeatedly asserted that personalized environments are only as functional as the professionals who create and operate them. While teachers were the core of the staff at these SSCs, respondents also highlighted the importance of having an adequate number of highly skilled support staff, particularly guidance counselors and social workers. This is not surprising, given the emphasis educators placed on supporting students’ social and emotional well-being and helping students resolve personal matters that lie outside of school (but affect their performance in school).

Illustrating the importance of guidance counselors to the work of his school, the principal at Fleetwood North asserted, “I believe in guidance interventions more than anything else.” The principals of Valley and Channel Bay concurred, with the latter noting that her school’s students and their families had substantial social needs and that the guidance program was “very instrumental” in providing students with adequate support. The assistant principal at Plainview described how the principal had placed a high priority on hiring a social worker, and made the unorthodox but important decision to have the social worker serve not just high-need students, as is typical in many schools, but the entire student population. The assistant principal said this decision—and the social worker’s skills—were the reasons that students’ social and emotional needs were so well met and why the school had such strong, supportive relationships with its students’ parents.

Systems for Monitoring Students

To make good use of their regularly scheduled grade-level team meetings, school staff developed or adopted systems for monitoring students’ academic progress and social and emotional well-being. Such systems were integral both for identifying struggling students and for assessing the effectiveness of the interventions that school staff

directed toward them. These systems differed across schools, though many shared similar components. They typically incorporated information about students' attendance (which some respondents described as being the first red flag identifying a struggling student), teachers' observational accounts of students' behavior and level of engagement in class, and advisors' and counselors' insights about how students were faring socially and emotionally. Beyond this, many schools also incorporated formal reviews of students' work and performance on assignments and in-class tests.

Educators at some schools described more elaborate systems, such as a computer program used at both East and Memorial, which monitored students' performance on a daily basis, identified pending assignment deadlines, and was accessible to parents. Staff at East invested a substantial amount of time in ensuring that parents were registered to use this program and encouraging them to monitor their children's performance. At both Delta and Riverside, respondents mentioned using on-track indicators (based on attendance, credit accumulation, and academic performance) to identify and monitor struggling students. In addition to using this information in grade-level meetings, Delta also displayed it prominently, to let students know whether they were on course to fulfill their academic objectives and, if not, to motivate them to make a change.

Beyond tracking student's academic progress, staff in many of these SSCs made an effort to identify and address socio-emotional issues as well. Like many of the educators we spoke with, the principal at Channel Bay described the importance of supporting both students' academic development and their social and emotional health:

Some schools just focus on, well, you're here to learn, and this is it. But not for us. Yes, you're here to learn, but what is it that's on your mind that might be keeping you from focusing on what you need to be doing in class today? How can we help you with that, so that doesn't become the primary thing in your life, and so you're able to focus more on school? We really work hard at that, because I think it's really important. If the kid's worrying about where he's going to sleep tonight, or if he's hungry or if there's domestic violence or something like that going on in the home, then we try to help the child, the family, so that the kid's able to focus on what they need to here, in school, to be successful.

We found clear links between strategies aimed at supporting students' social and emotional needs and efforts to engage parents. Educators reported that strong

relationships with students' parents—and being able to use information gleaned from parents to help students—required coordination across numerous school staff, including teachers (particularly those who were also advisors), administrators, guidance counselors, social workers, office staff, and social service entities outside the school, who also provided support for students and their families. Indeed, our interviews suggest that functional personalized environments require not only the structures, relationships, support staff, and monitoring systems that educators described as important, but also careful coordination across these varied components.

How do personalized learning environments facilitate students' success?

Our analysis revealed four prominent themes that helped us understand how and why personalized environments may have facilitated students' success and, hence, the success of SSCs' more broadly. Participants reported that their schools' personalized environments: 1) prevented students from falling through the cracks; 2) motivated students to succeed; 3) made it possible for students to focus on school by addressing their needs outside the classroom; and 4) enabled school staff to develop specific interventions for struggling students.

Keeping Students on Track

Respondents repeatedly noted how personalized environments allowed them to monitor students' progress closely, identify struggling students, and respond with assistance before it was too late. The assistant principal at Plainview high school compared Plainview's environment with the environment of larger NYC high schools, reporting:

The reason the kids don't fall through the cracks here is because they can't. Because, if they're absent, we call their house every day. If they're late, we call the parents... we have parents up constantly. We have teams of teachers getting together to make sure students achieve. That's the strength of a small school, in my opinion. The staff gets to know the students. I don't work at a large school but, in my opinion, at a large school, when you have 4,000 students or 1,000 in a graduating class, how can you possibly get to know every student and their individual needs? There are students in our building who would not be successful in a large school, but we're able to bring them from 9th grade, which is traditionally the toughest year, all the way to graduation.

Responses like these were prevalent throughout our interviews. While respondents described this aspect of personalized environments in slightly different terms—i.e., personalized environments enabled a greater depth of supervision, made anonymity impossible, prevented students from getting lost, etc.—the central point of these responses was the same: Personalized environments facilitated students' success by enabling teachers and administrators to track the progress of *all* students' and identify students in need of extra help. As a teacher at Leadership remarked in response to our open-ended question about keys to success: "...the main [factor] is... that we work really hard to develop personal relationships with the students, so there's not one student here who goes unnoticed or unwatched."

As Plainview's principal pointed out, it is easier to develop relationships with every student in a smaller environment. Yet, the structures and systems put in place in these schools can be employed by larger schools as well. According to these SSC educators, this level of attention to individual student progress and setbacks can make a difference between a student failing and succeeding in high school.

Motivating Students to Succeed

Interviewees reported that their school's personalized environments cultivated trusting relationships between students and school staff and that these relationships strengthened students' self-confidence and self-esteem—two fundamental precursors to success that many students initially lacked. In addition, when students knew that staff cared about them achieving their goals, they didn't want to let their teachers, counselors and administrators down. In this way, close relationships between staff and students provided important motivation that helped students succeed. For example, a teacher at Channel Bay explained:

If it wasn't for the interpersonal relationships that we develop with our students, I don't think that teachers, or students, or families would have the same sort of buy-in that we're able to cultivate. It's very difficult to tell a teacher that you've been working with for four years, 'I'm not going to be able to graduate because of this reason.' There's always something that that teacher knows, or that the advisor knows, about the student or the family, and brings out to the best of her ability to make students want to earn their diploma.

A teacher at East suggested that her school's ability to keep tabs on students helped make it clear that students' presence in school mattered. This, the teacher reported,

made students more inclined to come to school and more invested in their work. She explained:

Students know staff members that they don't even have as a teacher. They know them anyway, and [students] are noticed when they're not here and they're asked why they weren't here. They're held accountable for why they aren't here. I think that kind of accountability and that notice, attention and inclusion in a community setting has increased students' involvement and their wanting to be here. They're driving for success when they are here.

A sense of accountability, coupled with attention to individual student progress, created an environment in which students knew their success mattered to the adults in the building. This, in turn, kept them engaged and motivated them to do well academically.

Addressing Barriers to Student Success

Closely monitoring students' progress may help schools identify struggling students, but it doesn't dictate whether and how schools respond to those needs. Respondents stressed that addressing the larger family and community challenges that students faced outside of school—safety concerns, health problems, hunger, transience, to name a few—was essential to the success of personalized environments. The principal of Fleetwood North had seen so many examples of the academic benefits of attending to students' non-academic needs that he had concluded that “guidance interventions”—his term for interventions that addresses students' personal or family matters—facilitated students' success more than any other strategy that the school employed.

A teacher at Community described a student whose family lacked the resources to provide her with adequate clothing. The teacher explained:

I had one student who was falling out of her clothes... her clothes didn't fit. This was beyond academic, like, her pants were unzipped every day. And she was not succeeding in school because she was constantly... she was very ashamed.

Community's counselors and parent coordinators worked with the student's family to identify a community organization that could discreetly provide the girl with clothes that fit properly. With the issue resolved, the student was better able to focus on academics. Our interview data abound with similar stories.

Facilitating Individually Tailored Interventions

Related to the previous two themes, educators reported that their schools' personalized environments enabled staff to translate intimate knowledge about each student into individually tailored interventions and concrete recommendations about what students need to do to succeed. In some cases, as previous examples illustrate, these interventions required working closely with parents to address matters beyond the school walls. More generally, though, knowledge of individual students and their progress allowed staff to provide concrete, practical advice that helped students stay on track academically. As the principal of Mill Creek explained:

The seniors come to me on a regular basis, and I have a whole stack of what everyone needs to graduate. [They ask me,] 'Miss, what do I need to graduate? What do I need to get on track? What do I need to do this?' Myself and Ms. X and the other AP [assistant principal], Mr. Y, we know what all the seniors need. We all know what the juniors need. We know every single kid. We know what they need to graduate, what they need to take for Regents. [We say,] 'Okay, you need to do this, this and that.' And when we see them in the hallway, [we say,] 'Okay, did you do that? Did you do this?' It's kind of a motivational thing for them. They know that somebody is taking a vested interest in them.

This quote further illustrates how the many facets of personalized environments appear to interact and, collectively, promote students' success. For instance, the intimate knowledge of students, their home lives, and their families, which personalized environments enable, might be to little avail were it not for systems that help chart students' academic progress and, in the process, provide school staff with specific information about what students need to do or know in order to succeed. Moreover, neither knowledge of students nor data about their progress would necessarily lead to success were it not for relationships between staff and students, which motivate students to do their best and create opportunities for educators to follow-up with students and make sure they are fulfilling their end of the bargain.

Challenge: Maintaining Personalized Learning Environments as Schools Grow

In the most basic sense, a small school's size is what enables personalized environments. And while smallness, in itself, may not be sufficient for promoting trust and rapport, respondents asserted that SSCs' size made it easier to create an environment where school staff got to know students and used this knowledge to

support their development. Since the first two or three years of their operation, these SSCs (with the exception of two) have each grown by more than 100 students; in some cases, the student body has more than doubled in size (see Figure 2 on the next page), due to the addition of grades, the ability to attract more students, and increasing student assignments from the district. At the time of our interviews, 17 of the 25 schools were serving over 400 students (often exceeding the original SSC design of 108 students per grade), and five were serving over 500. (Appendix G shows the enrollment at each school, from 2004 to 2014). Educators reported that as their schools continued to grow—some beyond their initial capacity—their ability to foster personalized environments was being undermined, especially if they were not able to also increase their staff. Teachers at Valley, for example, shared that they no longer engage in “kid talk,” and the focus of collaboration is solely on instruction and content. East’s principal, describing the potential impact of school growth on personalization, said:

You’re not going to have that family sense anymore. Regrettably, a group of teachers will not be able to teach every single kid in a particular grade, especially at the lower grades, which to me is ultimately where the success or the failure of a school lies. That’s going to be massive. It doesn’t get any bigger than that.

Educators also noted that a larger size was detrimental to the strength of relationships and communication with students and their families. For instance, a teacher at East lamented:

As this school has been growing, it’s become difficult to make those phone calls to the parents. Before, we would have had 14 kids per teacher, now it’s way more than 14 kids. It’s a big load to go home over the weekend and call 40 parents or so to let them know how each student is doing in each of their classes. That’s something that we have lost because of the school growing. Parents depended on that phone call.

In many schools, growth strained already limited resources, especially in terms of staffing. Teachers at Parkway, for example, explained that the school had experienced an increase in students without an increase in faculty. As a result, teachers had to volunteer to teach extra periods every day. Some teachers reported that these extra periods made them less willing to engage in activities that had fostered personalization in the past. For example, they no longer allowed students to hang out in their classrooms during lunch and had stopped offering after-school clubs. Teachers also

expressed that it became harder to control the tone and safety of a building as the number of students grew without increased faculty. Even when principals could hire new teachers to keep up with the needs of a growing student population, the constant staffing changes created inconsistencies in the academic program. Thus, from the perspective of the educators we spoke with, substantial growth poses a fundamental threat to personalization—and to the long-term success of their schools.

Summary

As this chapter described in detail, a personalized learning environment emerged as the central feature of these schools' success. Educators said these environments facilitated relationships between staff and students, which in turn helped staff better meet their students' academic and non-academic needs. To create personalization, SSCs developed structures to foster strong relationships, collected data beyond grades and test scores, and hired key support staff, like social workers. Interviewees felt that these strategies promoted students' success primarily by preventing them from falling through the cracks and enabling teachers to provide individually tailored supports. However, as schools grew, it became more difficult to operate with the level of personalization educators believed was responsible for their success. As SSCs transition and adjust from very small environments to something larger, this growth may limit staff's capacity to serve their students with the same degree of individual attention and support they provided in the schools' first years. It also highlights the importance of creating enduring structures that can help maintain personalization despite growth. Further study may be able to pinpoint a size threshold where it becomes difficult or impossible to provide the level of personal attention necessary to serve all students effectively.

CHAPTER 5: ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS

A second factor that principals and teachers identified as critical to their schools' success was the commitment to high expectations for both students and staff. Similar to the term "personalization," "high expectations" is a common phrase in schools and among educators, but it is not always clear what establishing and maintaining high expectations entails in practice. Our interviews captured key features of a school environment with high expectations, namely a leader who has clear goals for staff and students (including students from subgroups that typically struggle to graduate), and translating expectations into specific objectives that guide the school's operation. Respondents argued that high expectations facilitated SSCs' success by undergirding schools' personalized environments and conveying to students that, with support from the school, they could graduate and be successful in college or work. However, educators noted the tenuous balance required in setting goals for students (as well as for their schools) that were ambitious but feasible—no small feat given the large percentage of NYC's 9th graders who enter high school with standardized test scores below grade level.

What do high expectations look like in practice?

In these SSCs, establishing high academic expectations for students seemed to begin with leadership: Principals articulated a clear mission, or vision, for the school, which entailed school staff working diligently and to very high standards to support students toward high school graduation—and help prepare them for success in college or work. Staff internalized this mission and sought to create and maintain these expectations in their daily interactions with students. To do so, educators created instructional programs aligned with these expectations and focused on college while also providing specific college supports.

School Leaders Set Expectations for Staff and Students

Educators highlighted several important steps that principals and teachers had taken to set high expectations. Most notably, respondents said that school leaders had articulated a mission, or vision, for the school that conveyed to the entire school community that students are expected to meet high academic standards. Principals also conveyed that teachers must both embrace this vision and perform at a similarly high level to help students accomplish these ambitious academic goals. A teacher at

Milford asserted that the principal's standards for staff played a critical role in creating a school that demanded excellence and commitment:

Ultimately, because [the principal] held us to such high expectations, we all met them. I think you would be really hard-pressed, especially those first few years, to have found a teacher who came into school and did not have a lesson plan or was not prepared, because that was not okay. [The principal] made [the expectations] clear, and people rose to the occasion.

In addition to setting high expectations for staff, principals also communicated how important it was for teachers to do the same for their students. As the founding principal of Leadership described:

We have huge expectations. If you don't have high expectations, we don't want you working here. That sounds harsh, but tough. Honestly. I don't want people to come in and have lower expectations for my kids because they're from the South Bronx, because they're coming in with a 1st or 2nd grade reading level.

Educators at other schools also described how the principal's expectations for students had set the stage for success. As one Riverside teacher explained:

If you challenge these kids, they will rise to that. I, of course, didn't believe that, but I've seen it happen. It's one of the things I always have to agree with [the principal] about... If you don't raise the bar, and you don't challenge students and show them their potential, then we're not going to have a school that's as successful as [this school]. The record is there. We have seen it. Again, it goes back to [the principal] and that vision of raising the bar, giving students every opportunity.

Similarly, a teacher at Constitution reflected that her founding principal "articulated from the very beginning that we had an eight-year mission—that our mission was to graduate our students from college."

Just as principals helped establish expectations for teachers and students when SSCs first opened, it was important that staff convey these expectations to students early in their experience of the school, as well as at various other points along the way.

At Riverside and several other schools, educators told us the process of communicating expectations to students begins before they set foot on campus at the beginning of 9th grade. Riverside's principal explained that, as soon as he receives his

student roster, he sends a welcome letter that suggests students “start their preparation for high school now.” The teachers at Channel Bay reported that the expectation that students attend college after graduation is shared during freshman orientation, “the minute they walk in” to the school. A teacher at Community echoed this approach, reporting, “We start talking to [students] immediately when they get here about going to college. It will be Advanced Regents¹² diplomas and college, that’s the expectation for all of our students.” Respondents at numerous other schools emphasized the same point. Educators noted that conveying these messages throughout students’ high school careers was important, but that setting these expectations at the outset was especially critical.

Expectations and Instructional Programs Are Aligned

Another important finding that emerged from our analysis is that high academic expectations for students are of little benefit unless schools take steps to provide an instructional program and a learning environment that make it possible for students to fulfill these expectations. The principal of Better Way summed up a point made by many when she described how her school’s instructional program and learning environment work in concert to help students’ meet the school’s high expectations:

We have high expectations, and we do what is necessary to get the kids to succeed. We provide them with the support, the additional classes they need so they can pass the exams and [their] classes. We offer after-school tutoring. We offer Saturday institute, and they get a free Metrocard and a free snack. We call them. We give them a wake-up call to come in, because many times they just need someone to shake them out of bed. I call in the mornings. We have my parent coordinator call, my school aide calls, teachers call. Students come, and they get an opportunity to make up work, to catch up with where they have a deficit, and to prepare for the Regents exams.

The key thing is that we want them to succeed, and we do what is necessary. If they don’t come to class, to school, we send folks to their home. First of all, we send letters. We do phone calls. If they still don’t come in, we send “attendance teachers” to their homes. If they still don’t come in, we send ACS—Administration [for] Children’s Services—to their homes. We bring the parents in to talk to us. We recommend mental health counseling if we feel that that’s the problem, if the child is getting angry often, in conflicts often, looks depressed. We are alert to what’s happening with the child.

The breadth of services and the depth of commitment that this principal described should leave little doubt about the importance of the numerous steps that schools take to help students fulfill the high expectations set for them.

In our interviews and focus groups, we probed to understand more about how schools created an instructional program that made it possible for students to graduate well prepared for college or the workplace. Respondents highlighted the importance of including challenging classes, such as Advanced Placement courses, in their instructional program and of ensuring that all classes require students to complete challenging assignments. For instance, a teacher at West described her school's policy of requiring 9th graders to write a 10-20 page report and make a one-hour presentation to external evaluators as an example of a course that both demands a lot of students and helps them develop skills that they will need in college. The principal at Springside described an elaborate instructional program that offered a variety of courses aimed at preparing students of different academic abilities to take the same challenging courses before they graduate. He explained:

The way that we program students is special. What we'll do is we'll take a student, they'll take, say, the math Regents and the Living Environment [Regents], and then we'll look at their classes. I'll sit down with the guidance counselors and the programmer and my assistant principal, and we'll look at the data. Where is this student? The student may have passed the Living Environment, done fine with that. But if their math is not up to par, they're not going to be successful in chemistry. What I do, then, is I have a bridge course in chemistry. Students get exposure to the chemistry and everything, but without all of the math, while their math is being caught up. Then, the following year, they're programmed for chemistry. Those coming out of chemistry, again, if I don't feel they're ready yet for the physics, they'll take conceptual physics first and then physics. I do believe in exposing the students to the hardcore science... in order to be college ready. They can go in and be successful in those things.

Other schools employed a similar strategy of targeting particular courses to students of different abilities. For instance, Milford developed a specific algebra course for students who passed algebra but who would likely need to take remedial math classes in college, unless they could improve their skills before graduating. Memorial offers a writing elective meant to prepare students for the rigors of writing at the college level.

Schools Focus on College

While not as widespread, a small number of SSCs placed a strong emphasis on college and made a concerted effort to provide students with college-related support. Teachers at Riverside explained how the school's principal had transformed a mediocre school into a successful one by focusing on college readiness and what it would take to get students there. In response to our question about the features of the school most responsible for its success, a Riverside teacher remarked:

The last five years, we have had a very strong principal. He turned this school around... I think... [the school's success is due to his] high expectations. When he came in, he realized the school can do really well on the Progress Report if we just meet the state standards, meet the city standards and do not do anything effective. You can still get an "A," but he didn't want that. He wanted the kids to be college ready. He had this idea that a 65 on the Regents exam wasn't enough. I think the expectation that he held—for students to have a program that would allow them to, after four years, get an Advanced Regent's diploma, and holding them accountable to that standard [has been important to the school's success].

Beyond the school's core instructional program, educators described taking other important steps to convey expectations about college and to support students' efforts to fulfill these expectations. Some schools required that students either apply to college (e.g., Constitution) and/or that students are accepted to a college even if they decide not to attend (e.g., Valley). Respondents in a number of schools, including Mill Creek, Memorial, and Central, described taking students on formative college trips, including visits to demanding colleges and universities and institutions outside of New York City, to which students might not otherwise be able to travel. In describing what these trips communicate to students, the principal at Memorial reported a straightforward, explicit message: "This is where we see you four years from now. We see you checking into the dorm." The assistant principal at Mill Creek highlighted the importance of college trips as part of the school's effort to convey high academic expectations to students. She reported:

The whole learning environment surrounding college is very big. When the kids come in here, we don't tell them you need 44 credits to graduate. We tell them, 'This is what you need to be college ready.' We start motivating them for success as soon as they come in. We have banners of where our kids are going to go to college... We have bulletin

boards with college open houses. We do college tour trips to historically Black colleges with all grade levels.

In addition to college trips, Delta hosted its own college event, at which representatives from colleges—including some of the most competitive colleges and universities in the country—interact with students and, in the process, help students envision pursuing college after high school graduation.

Educators also reported the importance of providing resources to support the college application process. This was especially vital in schools, such as Constitution, that required all students to apply to college. In separate interviews, both the teachers and principal at Constitution emphasized the role that their college support services played in making this possible. The principal described:

Students' 12th grade year is really spent on the college application process. That's what their advisors are doing with them: 'Here's your list of colleges. Let's fill out the applications. Let's do your FAFSA.' I mean, all of those kinds of pieces happen here. We're really making sure the kids are in good colleges and that they stay there, that there's a high retention rate in college. That seems very elusive to a lot of public schools because they don't have the manpower or a lot of the pieces in place or the protocols in place to really do that kind of work.

Constitution's principal went on to describe monitoring students' progress extensively, even after they graduate. One staff member was responsible for following up with alumni and intervening if a student was having trouble in college, especially during their first year, when many students drop out. This level of ongoing support was not typical across schools in the sample. More frequently, teachers and counselors worked together to help students with the application process. At Central and Valley, for instance, staff helped with college application essays. Overall, the college focus—coupled with the targeted college support—appears to make high expectations more concrete by helping students have a vision for their future after high school and a plan for how to get there.

How do schools' high academic expectations facilitate students' success?

Educators' accounts suggest that high expectations facilitated success in several notable ways. First, expectations undergirded schools' personalized environments and sent an important signal to students that many had not yet heard during their

schooling: with our support, you are capable of doing well in this school, graduating, and succeeding in college and/or the workforce. Second, because they focus on success across all subgroups of students, schools must find ways to differentiate their instruction and services to ensure that all types of students are working to their full potential and accomplishing objectives that are simultaneously ambitious and realistic.

Underscoring Schools' Personalized Environments

Educators' explanations of their schools' success often revolved around the close relationship between high academic expectations and learning environments that support students' progress toward these objectives. Perhaps no one described this relationship more succinctly than a teacher at Plainview, who remarked:

Our [school's] personalized learning environment and high academic expectations are the most important [features of the school that are responsible for our success]. You've got to show the kids what they're capable of doing by expecting them to do it. Then, of course, the more personalized it is, the more you're able to help them [succeed].

In other words, by setting high expectations, staff could create a vision of success that was shared by the entire school community. And by offering a personalized environment, staff could then help students work toward these goals. The high degree of personalization also helped staff translate high expectations into specific objectives for each student.

Respondents' explanations of how high expectations facilitated students' success were similar—in some ways, indistinguishable—from their descriptions of how their schools' personalized environments facilitated success, which seems reasonable given the interrelatedness of the two. For instance, respondents explained that their schools' high academic expectations bolstered students' confidence and prompted them to believe in themselves based on others' expectations of their capabilities. More specifically, by focusing on preparation for college, schools presented students with an option that many had not considered possible. As the principal at Motivation explained, "Many [of our students] come from a background where college was not even talked about, thought about, or even a possibility." Thus, SSCs' expectations for students provide some with a counter-narrative to guide their progress: you can do this; with our help, you can go to college and succeed there. As the principal at Riverside explained, the school's expectations, and the steps the school took to put these expectations into practice, helped "demystify the transition" to college and serve

as a countervailing force against a damaging sentiment that is pervasive in many urban students' peer groups: that being successful in college or getting a good job is beyond reach.

Directing Attention to Student Subgroups

Educators described the importance of conveying to *all* subgroups of students that high expectations apply to them, including to students who typically struggle academically, such as those with special education Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or those with limited English proficiency. In separate interviews, the principal and teachers at Springside illustrated this point by describing how their school attempts to bring very different subgroups of students—including special education students, of which the school has a substantial proportion, as well as gifted students doing “graduate-level research”—to the same outcome after four years of high school: graduating prepared to succeed in some form of college.

Educators noted that having high academic expectations for all students prompted schools to be more deliberate about meeting the needs of particular student subgroups. Some schools, such as Springside and Bayview, attributed their overall success to their ability to work effectively with subgroups of students who need extra support. At these SSCs, students were grouped into cohorts during their freshman year. Their schedules and curricula differed according to their needs, with some students receiving, for instance, double periods of English. Interestingly, while this approach sounded quite a bit like academic tracking—a method long associated with perpetuating different (and lower) expectations for certain students—the schools embraced collaborative team teaching¹³ (CTT) and rejected relegating special education students to self-contained classrooms. They saw this approach as central to their success in working with special education students. Other schools, like Delta, also used CTT for every classroom that had a minimal number of special education students. This way, students were integrated into regular classrooms, but could still receive the extra support they needed.

Supporting students with such different academic needs required teachers and principals in SSCs to think creatively about their curriculum, staffing, and organization. At Springside, for example, the school's hiring committee recruited teachers who were certified in special education but who had very strong content knowledge in some other subject area; having teachers with strong backgrounds in a particular subject allowed teachers at Springside to support gifted students' pursuits,

sometimes through one-on-one mentoring arrangements. At Bayview, the principal not only hired teachers with special education training for regular classrooms, but also selected an assistant principal with a background in special education. (Bayview also had five full-time counselors, two part-time psychologists, and a social worker.) In fact, hiring staff who can play multiple roles emerged as a practice educators viewed as central to their school's success, which we discuss in the next chapter. These approaches also speak to the school's commitment to high expectations for *all* students despite their skill levels.

Challenge: Tensions Around Academic Expectations

Interestingly, while nearly all of our respondents discussed the importance of high expectations, their accounts suggest that they held different notions of what high expectations are and how to reinforce them. Though educators at a smaller group of schools identified obtaining a Regents diploma as their ultimate objective for students, educators at most schools expected students to do more. In fact, many teachers and principals described high academic expectations as being synonymous with enrolling and succeeding in college. At a handful of schools, educators held broader definitions of success that included possibly forgoing post-secondary education but succeeding in the workplace.

Our analysis also revealed that the SSCs in our sample adopted notably different strategies for putting expectations into practice. Some schools embraced the type of “no excuses” model often associated with KIPP schools. This approach, in essence, demands that students meet the schools' academic expectations and offers students little defense for not having done so. Other schools, such as Riverside, relied on nearly inexhaustible patience with students. The Riverside model, at times a source of contention among teachers, required students to fulfill expectations, but gave them a great deal of flexibility about when and how they met them. In practice, this meant, for example, that teachers were not allowed to enforce firm deadlines for papers, but rather were required to work with students until the paper was completed. While our interview data do not allow us to identify the number of schools across the entire sample that fall into each of these two camps, we were struck by this fundamental difference among some of the schools we studied.

In addition to differing definitions of high expectations and philosophies for how to meet them, respondents in many of the SSCs also discussed the inherent difficulty of setting and meeting appropriate academic expectations. Respondents vividly

described the challenge of educating students who enter high school performing far below grade level while at the same time providing work that is stimulating to high-performing students. Some questioned whether it is realistic to expect both groups of students to become college ready in four years. Staff said it was difficult to be held accountable by the DOE for students who come into their schools highly underprepared but are nonetheless expected to graduate on time and attend college. A tension thus emerged between setting realistic, individualized academic goals for students and meeting external accountability standards. Parkway's principal described:

[The DOE is] making part of the report card this matrix around college readiness. So they want to know what courses you're teaching that are equivalent to being college ready and/or where a kid could get college credits. When a student comes into high school, at best three or four years behind, are we really talking about college-ready classes? I mean, I'm trying to teach a kid just how to read.

Educators from more than half of the 25 SSCs questioned the validity of some current accountability measures, even while striving to meet them. Principals especially argued that it is not fair to evaluate their success based on four-year graduation rates or the DOE's definition of college readiness when many of their students come in so far behind. Respondents argued that significant gains could be made with these students during a year, but none of these successes would show up on measures by which schools were being assessed.

Interviewees also reported that the pressure from the DOE to produce certain numbers in terms of graduation and passing rates could, ironically, result in their compromising high academic expectations or passing students who have not mastered content. The principal of Carroll questioned, "Do I want to have [a] high graduation rate just so that my job can be safe and that the DOE is happy? Or do I want to graduate students that are competent and ready to go out and really do well?" One teacher at South Division said of the DOE standards:

... it is becoming very hard to fail a student or give a negative consequence because that is reflected in our own data, and it's like pressure from above just to sort of—to move everybody through as quickly and cleanly as possible. I feel like our problem is maintaining what we want to do while being successful at the data game.

Many teachers described how “teaching to the Regents” (i.e., focusing instruction on helping students pass tests for graduation) meant sacrificing other, possibly more relevant, types of academic skills, such as critical thinking. This is a concern that is likely shared by other teachers in the system as well, but it was particularly frustrating for many of these small school educators because they believed a unique opportunity to meet students’ individual needs was being compromised. This tension between setting high expectations based on specific measures and meeting students where they are seems particularly germane to SSCs, especially in their emphasis on personalized learning. This inherent conflict also raises larger questions for the entire system—for instance, how can the district strike a balance between holding schools accountable and helping schools meet students where they are?

Summary

Respondents frequently cited, and described in depth, the importance of teachers and principals having high expectations, both for students and for one another. They argued that high expectations facilitate SSCs’ success by providing clear objectives for school staff to work toward and prompting them to develop strategies to support particular student sub-groups. Principals and teachers noted the importance of focusing on each student’s individual benchmarks and growth, creating an instructional program that aligns with those goals, and conveying to students that, with support from the school, they can graduate and be successful in college or work. At the same time, there appeared to be different definitions of high expectations across SSCs. Despite this variation, many of the educators we spoke with shared a central conflict—between pursuing their own benchmarks of success and meeting the DOE’s accountability standards.

CHAPTER 6: TEACHERS

The third feature that teachers and principals in the 25 effective SSCs identified as central to their school's success was the quality of the teaching staff. The assumption that high-quality teachers make for better schools is widespread, but our interviews dug deeper to try to identify specific characteristics and capacities of strong teachers. Many respondents focused on the vital role that teachers play in creating and managing their schools' personalized environments. For instance, educators reported that it was critical to hire staff who are interested in, and skillful at, building the types of trusting relationships with students that are at the core of effective personalized environments. The need for teachers to be compassionate and caring was omnipresent in the data. Respondents also highlighted the importance of other teacher characteristics, namely their flexibility, leadership, and dedication. Principals especially went on to describe specific strategies they used to recruit and hire teachers with these traits. While teachers were described as a cornerstone of SSCs' success, the expectations placed on teachers in these schools often led to burnout and turnover—a challenge that school leaders and policymakers will need to contend with as they think about how to maintain and expand SSCs' achievements.

What are the characteristics and capacities of effective teachers in the SSCs?

Interviewees talked at length about the different traits their teachers possess, which they believe help make their school successful. Three characteristics were mentioned repeatedly across schools: flexibility, leadership, and dedication.

Flexibility

Respondents spoke forcefully about their colleagues' flexibility and willingness to take on multiple roles, sometimes outside their areas of expertise. One of the primary challenges that SSCs face is that, because they are small, there are fewer staff to cover the range of subjects and tasks required in a high school. Given this, educators explained, success hinges on finding teachers who are flexible enough to play diverse roles, who are versatile across a variety of subject areas, and who are willing to reinvent themselves to fit their school's needs. A teacher at Kentford illustrated this point:

...a lot of our strong teachers will switch subjects and earn extra certifications for the sake of helping kids pass. M. is a social studies teacher, has that certification, but

through staying after school and learning the algebra curriculum, she was able to assist with that subject. I came in as social studies and then got my English certification, so now I help with the two social studies tests and the English test. N. is mostly a global [history] teacher, but he will always help out with U.S. history prep. We have a flute teacher who's a real whiz at math and science, and was a math minor, so she now helps out with the math and the science Regents' prep classes. A lot of it is flexibility... being able to put our best people in as many positions as possible.

In other cases, teachers and principals talked less about cross-subject contributions and more about how teachers are willing to attend and support different types of school events, from after-school awards ceremonies to field trips to fun activities, such as open-mic nights and other performances. In general, respondents described how teachers' work extends beyond regular school hours, including after school, during their lunch period, and on weekends, when many of the SSCs offered academic support, like credit recovery programs and Regents preparation.

Leadership

Also related to SSCs' small size is the need for a relatively large proportion of a school's teachers to assume leadership roles in order for the school to function. At larger high schools, the size of the teaching staff often far exceeds the number of leadership opportunities for teachers, such as subject area department chairs, deans, leaders of data inquiry groups, etc. Not so, we learned, at many of these smaller high schools. A teacher at Memorial attributed her school's success, in part, to teachers' willingness to fulfill leadership roles that would not be expected of them at larger schools. After describing the astonishment that many teachers at larger high schools express about her SSC having only two administrators, this teacher explained:

There's a lot of leadership among the teachers [at this SSC]. The curriculum work groups are all led by a teacher. There's an opportunity for almost every teacher to be a leader of some kind of group or committee in some way. I'm the 9th grade team leader. The 9th grade Spanish teacher leads the curriculum work group. There's all these different areas where teachers can kind of step up and be the leaders.

In these SSCs, it was typical for teachers to take on leadership responsibilities commonly held by other types of staff (e.g., assistant principals) in larger high schools. Principals said that their teachers often worked to address issues outside of their own

classrooms and important to the larger school community, such as the physical environment and whether or not students had enough extra-curricular programs.

Dedication

Respondents also lauded, and noted the importance of, their teachers' dedication to their work, their school and, most importantly, their students. Principals and teachers alike used the phrase "above and beyond" to describe the efforts of the teaching staff in these SSCs. One principal illustrated this point by mentioning that, when he is leaving for the day, he frequently has to say to teachers who are still in school, "Look, you can't stay too late." Other interviewees characterized their school's staff as believing that teaching is "more than just a job" and as being willing to "do whatever it takes" to help students' achieve their academic objectives. A teacher at Valley summarized this sentiment:

I think the success of [this school] is driven by the staff here. Many uncompensated hours working with kids in this school and staying in school. I mean, there's a huge commitment of teachers to come in early and stay late and give up their lunch periods with not a consideration of compensation.

We heard this message in many of the 25 schools—that their success was at least partly the result of teachers' unfailing commitment to serving their students, even if that meant working many more hours than what is specified in their contract and taking on added responsibilities without pay.

Teachers and principals often described this dedication as particularly important given the student populations that SSCs serve. Some respondents argued that it simply wouldn't be possible to succeed with their students without putting in an effort that transcends their job descriptions and formal responsibilities. Beyond the direct benefit of the additional hours helping strengthen students' skills, teachers' deep care for their students and their capacity to build relationships with them were critical to their school's success, according to many of the educators we interviewed. Community's principal, for example, spoke at length about these qualities.

....If the kids feel like they have a good rapport with the teacher and that this is not just a place where they're learning, but also where they feel understood and cared about, they're going to grow. In an urban school, it's not just about how well the teacher knows his or her subject, but how well they can relate to the kids. A lot of the kids don't have any home support, so we're in loco parentis. For a lot of the kids, their success depends

on how much they like their teachers, because there's no one at home who they're performing for, so it's kind of a situation where, if they really like their teacher, they're going to do well for that teacher. That actually is going to determine a lot of their success.

While this principal emphasized the role of teacher dedication, he also mentioned the importance of this trait among all staff, including support staff and administrators. Overall, educators in SSC reported that flexible, dedicated teachers with the capacity to lead were central to their schools' success.

How did SSCs identify and hire the “right” teachers?

Educators spoke about the importance of schools beginning with a core of strong teachers who epitomized the expectations and dedication that the work required. They went on to describe specific recruitment and hiring practices that helped their schools identify the best teachers for the job. These included committee-based hiring processes that gave most of the hiring responsibility to teachers, and in some cases, to students; interview strategies that helped school staff determine which candidates were the best match for their environment (including demonstration lessons, impromptu writing, and lesson plan exercises); the identification of pipelines that bring strong candidates to their schools; and policies—such as not hiring any first-year teachers—intended to ensure that new hires would be effective from the outset. It should be noted that all SSC teachers are members of the teachers union; thus, the lessons we learned from these schools may be broadly applicable to other NYC public schools.

Committee-Based Hiring

The vast majority of interviewees depicted hiring processes that grant responsibilities to a committee. The composition of the committees differed across schools, though most contained some combination of teachers, parents, students and, on occasion, guidance staff. Interestingly, administrators at many schools either deliberately limited their role in the hiring process or, in several instances, excluded themselves from altogether.

Principals spoke at length about the benefits of the committee approach to hiring. For subject teacher positions, they noted the importance of deferring to the teachers with the strongest knowledge of the subject matter. They also talked about the value of

letting teachers choose the individuals with whom they would be working closely. For instance, the principal at Constitution reported:

I put a lot of the teacher hiring into the hands of the teachers. We have a pretty rigorous process to make sure that we're getting the right-fit person for our school... The department leader, who is a teacher, is in charge of the hire. They put together a hiring committee of teachers. They run interviews, demo lessons. We ask the kids in the classes that are experiencing the demo lessons to rate the candidates. The teachers rate the candidates, as well. The department leaders usually come to me like, 'Okay we have a couple of really top candidates, so we want you to meet them. We want your input on this... This is the person we want to hire, and this is why we want to hire this person.'

I feel like that is a really good system because [the teachers] are going to have to work together. They're going to have to be colleagues. They want to make sure that they're getting high-quality teachers who are going to be a good fit for the school, a good fit with the students, and who are going to be able to work in a collaborative environment. I feel like it also puts an added piece of accountability onto the person that's being hired because they know that they've been hired by their colleagues.

Principals also noted that committee hiring processes sent important signals to candidates, such as the message that teachers were expected to play an integral role in the operation of the school. The principal and assistant principal at Leadership emphasized this point, noting:

Assistant Principal: We're the last [people to meet the candidates]. They meet the hiring committee, which is composed of teachers, students, and sometimes parents when they're available. The teachers have their questions, the students have their questions, because it's not just hiring and filling a position, it's seeing if this is a good fit for our community.

Principal: And when people are applying for a job and being interviewed, the hiring committee's really clear that this is not a 'teach your four courses, five courses, and go home' kind of thing. This is a highly collaborative school. You work in grade levels, you work in departments, you work in committees, and [the committee] will ask, 'What else can you do? What else are you interested in doing here, because you have to [contribute]?' They're very insistent. I think, by setting up the hiring committee model, that expectation starts before [candidates] walk in the door.

The hiring committee at Channel Bay consisted of teachers, who conducted roundtable interviews using nine key questions they had developed and refined over a number of years. At Bayview and Riverside, students played a role both as participants on the committee and in endorsing candidates. While the specific composition and approach of the committees differed across schools, there was a common theme of valuing input from all members of the school community—and of putting much of the final say about new hires in the hands of current teachers.

Strategic Interview Practices

Educators described a range of innovative practices that helped them identify the best teachers for their schools. They spoke in depth about how these practices provided them with critical information about candidates' suitability for the job. For instance, at Memorial, the hiring committee conducted a "fish bowl" interview with a group of candidates simultaneously. In this exercise, Memorial's hiring committee asks candidates to reason through difficult hypothetical scenarios that they might encounter in their work, while committee members focused on different aspects of candidates' responses: their interpersonal skills, tendency to reflect, and composure in the company of competitors for the position. Beyond the appropriateness of candidates' responses, this exercise provided committee members with insight into the candidates' receptivity to being observed and scrutinized, and their ability to be transparent about their thinking. Channel Bay orchestrated a seemingly unplanned (to the candidate), informal conversation with parents, which they used to gauge candidates' ability to form relationships with students' families—something staff see as fundamentally important to the school's personalized environment.

Similarly, while many schools required candidates to teach demonstration lessons, some schools modified this exercise to provide additional information about candidates' potential match with their SSC. For example, Fleetwood North required candidates to teach demo lessons in front of a classroom comprised of the schools' most challenging-to-manage students. At Kentford, the hiring committee provided candidates with feedback on their demonstration lesson, discussed the feedback with the candidates, then gave candidates time to gather their thoughts before teaching the demonstration lesson to another group of students. The hiring committee at Kentford put as much, or more, weight on candidates' ability to accept and incorporate feedback as on the quality of the initial demonstration lesson. Community high school engaged in a similar exercise, though it was centered around a lesson plan (rather than a demonstration lesson) that the principal requested and reviewed before the

interview. Springside asked candidates to create an impromptu lesson plan with another teacher, providing insight into a candidate's willingness to collaborate. Across schools, these strategies reflect not only a creative approach to learning about candidates' strengths and weaknesses, but also an investment of a significant amount of time and attention in identifying the right teachers to join each SSC.

Other Criteria for Selecting or Excluding Candidates

In addition to the hiring practices described above, respondents in some SSCs noted the importance of establishing policies or criteria that screen out particular types of teachers, particularly inexperienced ones. While this point was only articulated by respondents at a handful of schools in the sample, the strength of respondents' testimony seemed to warrant its mention. For instance, the principal at Memorial reported, "We have, and we've tried to get, very, very few first-year teachers. In the course of a year, maybe one or two [teachers] are new to the profession, straight off the boat." Similarly, when asked to describe an ideal teacher candidate, the principal at Valley remarked, "I like someone who's been teaching for two or three years, so they're still cheap, but they've screwed up somewhere else and they've learned their lessons." Lastly, at West, a teacher described his school's deliberate movement away from recruiting new teachers after having sought them out in the school's early years:

In our first year, we opened with only one teacher who had any previous classroom teaching experience. The rest of us were all brand new first year teachers. That's because it's easier to find brand new, first-year teachers who are super hard-working and who are committed to all the crazy, heavy lifting that is involved in opening a school. A lot of experienced people aren't really interested in that job.

As we've gotten older, we've shifted the focus from looking for people who are going to work crazy, crazy, crazy hours to people who are really smart, really articulate, and really experienced—particularly, experienced working with a population similar to ours: New York City kids, or city kids...diverse student populations.

While respondents in only a few schools described avoiding hiring any new teachers, their comments exemplify the type of deliberate decision-making that many of these principals and other staff practiced while considering which teachers to recruit and hire. Many targeted candidates from particular teacher pipelines. Interestingly, the source of these pipelines differed across the schools in our sample, with some schools deliberately avoiding certain pipelines that others had identified as the most reliable

source of strong teachers. For instance, after several bad experiences hiring candidates from Teach for America (TFA), Leadership avoided TFA candidates at all costs. At Memorial, by contrast, the principal had deliberately sought out TFA candidates for years. Many respondents mentioned recruiting candidates from the NYC Teaching Fellows Program, though their reviews of Teaching Fellows were not universally positive. Some schools, such as Rockford, recruited candidates from a university with which they had a formal partnership. Other schools, such as Fleetwood North, Central, and West reported that “word of mouth” recommendations were their most reliable source of quality teachers. Central looked to hire experienced teachers from schools that shared a similar educational philosophy. Some schools, such as Delta and Valley, reported that they did not solicit teachers from any pipeline because they were inundated with resumes of interested candidates, even when they did not have any job openings. Other schools, like West, described casting a wide recruitment net to review as many potential candidates as possible for every opening. The principal at West reported advertising openings on Craigslist and reviewing several hundred applications for each position.

Thus, while there was some consistency among interviewees about what qualities teachers need to be successful in SSCs, there was much more variation in terms of preference for specific pipelines.

Challenge: Teacher Burnout in Small Schools

As described above, interviewees attributed their schools’ success, in part, to the characteristics of their teachers and to recruitment and hiring practices that helped them identify teachers who were a good match for their school. At the same time, however, respondents noted that the level of effort required to operate an effective SSC was taxing for teachers and, in some cases, untenable.

Educators reported that SSC’s extraordinary demands on teachers were challenging from the beginning. At start-up, because schools did not have enough students to justify hiring teachers in non-core subjects (e.g., foreign languages, music, art, technology), core-subject teachers had to take on these courses along with their primary assignments. Founding teachers reported that they not only juggled multiple subjects, but were also involved in other school-wide activities, including writing curriculum, scheduling students, coaching teams, and starting clubs. Respondents acknowledged that, while their teachers’ flexibility and willingness to take on roles outside of their expertise was critical to their schools’ success, it also presented

challenges that could eventually take a toll on their teaching staff. One teacher at Plainview described:

My first year here, I wore so many different hats. Not only was I a regular English teacher, but I also did the [literacy program]. I was a [literacy program] teacher as well as the on-level English teacher... I was also the technology teacher, and I really had no experience whatsoever with that. We also had advisories, so I was also the advisory teacher. You had to do lessons in that also. I had four or five different preps. Now I'm just English. I just have sophomore and junior [classes]—so much easier in planning. The first year was so rough because everyone had to wear so many different hats... That was very challenging.

Teachers also recalled the difficulty of being the sole teacher in a particular department and being wholly responsible for creating that department's curriculum. Having to take on numerous responsibilities inside and outside the classroom while also running a subject department proved difficult for many of the teachers who started during their school's first year. These conditions were especially challenging for relatively new teachers who had little experience teaching, let alone leading a department or managing other aspects of the school's operation.

The small number of staff members and the expectation that teachers take on multiple and shifting responsibilities continued to be difficult well beyond SSCs' first years of operation. In more than half of the schools, staff reported that it continued to be challenging to fulfill all of the requirements of a regular-sized high school with many fewer staff members. They reported that playing multiple roles was fatiguing because of the volume *and* range of responsibilities. One teacher at Rockford said:

In the larger school, those tasks would be easier to delegate. People could handle a smaller variety of tasks, even though the load may be the same, but their focus would be narrowed. I think that that's one of the things in a small school. The assistant principal of instruction is not only supporting teachers, but she's also the school accountant. That's really challenging when you have so many jobs for one person.

Teachers also reported that the diversity of their assigned roles made it more difficult to become experts or specialized in certain areas, especially if they had to teach different classes from year to year.

Respondents noted that one potential consequence of taking on multiple roles and responsibilities is burnout. When explaining teacher turnover in their schools, several staff members attributed teachers leaving due to the heavy workload outside their primary subject area and teaching role. Some worried that expecting teachers to consistently go above and beyond might result in a de facto situation where teachers at SSCs were all relatively young and inexperienced. For example, a few principals said that their maturing teachers were unable, or unwilling, to commit the same amount of time to the school as they had earlier in their careers. Milford's principal described the maturation of his staff and what it might mean for the school:

Principal: Going forward? I think the interesting challenge I've considered... is that we have a lot of teachers in... kind of that four, five, six, seven year(s of) teaching. So they're young. They live in Greenpoint, and Williamsburg, and they pay too much for their rent. But it's a cool place to live. You know, because we can go out after work and have a good time. But as they get older and they get married and they have families and the children and the child care expenses, [NYC] becomes less desirable (as a) place to live. [Chuckles] And they want to move to Long Island, New Jersey, Staten Island, somewhere more affordable. These things happen.

Interviewer: So a maturing teacher population might go away?

Principal: Well no, not that they'll go away. That they'll be less inclined to go above and beyond.

Teachers' dedication and willingness to do whatever was needed allowed them to provide students with the kind of support they might not receive elsewhere. This principal's concerns, however, suggest challenges to the sustainability of this model. If the SSC's effectiveness is partially contingent upon teachers' willingness to put in extra work, it may be difficult to maintain their success as teachers' lifestyles change and competing responsibilities no longer permit the same level of commitment.

The challenge of a maturing teaching staff raises questions about how to develop a sustainable approach to success, as opposed to creating successful outcomes in the short term. Does a "by any means necessary" attitude or ethos work over time? Can a school continue to be successful if teachers no longer put in 12-hour days? One school in particular came to the conclusion that "by any means necessary" is not sustainable in the long term. When searching for a new principal, that school's founding principal and teachers purposefully recruited and hired an individual who would have more reasonable expectations around teachers' time commitments than

those of the founding principal. Though the teachers in that school attributed their early success to their founding principal, they agreed that that lifestyle would have been impossible to maintain over time and were appreciative of the balance and more measured pace provided by the new principal.

Summary

In addition to personalization and high expectations, interviewees described the teachers in their school as vital to its success. They pointed to teachers' flexibility and willingness to take on multiple roles, sometimes outside their areas of expertise, as especially important. Given the small size of these schools, there are fewer staff to cover the range of subjects and the myriad tasks required to manage a high school. Thus, respondents explained, part of SSCs' success hinges on finding teachers who are talented, versatile, and willing to stretch themselves to fit their schools' needs. The educators we spoke with also noted the importance of specific recruitment and hiring practices that helped their school identify the best teachers for the job. These included committee-based hiring processes; interview practices that help determine which candidates are the best match; and pipelines that bring strong candidates to their school. One of the reported tradeoffs for expecting teachers to regularly go "above and beyond" was teacher burnout. Principals, especially, wondered if it was possible for staff to maintain the same level of energy they exerted in the first few years of the SSC's operation.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

MDRC's work (Bloom et al. 2010; Bloom & Unterman 2011; Bloom & Unterman 2013; Bloom & Unterman 2014) has shown that, on average, the City's small schools of choice are outperforming other schools, particularly in terms of graduation rates for disadvantaged students of color. These findings are encouraging and raise several important new questions for policy and practice: How did these schools achieve their success? Which practices or strategies set these schools apart? Can these practices be applied in other schools and/or inform system-wide efforts to improve high school outcomes? This report begins to answer these questions by closely examining the perspectives of educators in 25 small schools that had strong positive impacts for students. Almost across the board, principals and teachers in these schools identified personalized learning environments as essential to their success. They also pointed to high academic expectations and the quality of their school's teachers as important factors. External partnerships, while a notable success factor for some schools, were cited with much less regularity and prominence across the 25 schools. Interestingly, two features that were part of SSC's theory of action—intermediary support networks and school themes—were *not* cited by these educators as central to their success.

While much has been written about the importance of personalization and academic expectations from a theoretical perspective, this report shows how these factors can be put into practice, with concrete examples from 25 successful schools. We found, for instance, that establishing strong personalized learning environments hinged on specific structures that enabled staff to build relationships with students and work with colleagues to identify and respond to individual students' issues. In addition, personalized environments required strategies for connecting with families and addressing student needs outside as well as inside the classroom. Educators felt that strong personalized environments prevented students from falling off track and motivated them to reach their goals, while also allowing teachers to tailor their instruction to each student and provide extra support where needed.

Policymakers and educators commonly cite high expectations as important, but it's not always clear what this means for the day-to-day work of teachers and students. In these SSCs, high expectations applied not only to students' academic performance, but also to educators' expectations for themselves and their colleagues. These expectations were translated into benchmarks for individual student growth,

strategies for supporting specific subgroups like special education students and English Language Learners, and a strong school-wide focus on preparing young people for college.

In addition to personalization and high expectations, staff in these schools also attributed their success to teachers who were willing to take on multiple roles and had the ability to connect with students. Schools were very deliberate about building a teaching staff with these characteristics and employed several different recruitment and hiring strategies to ensure that new teachers would be a good fit.

The success factors we've described do not work in isolation. In fact, the *integration* of these factors seemed critical to the schools' success. Functional personalized environments—those that support students' academic progress as well as social and emotional well-being—appear to be the product of teachers and administrators with shared, equally high expectations for students, and with the right skills, working together to create and maintain an elaborate, deliberate system for supporting students' development. The following dialogue illustrates the interrelatedness of personalized environments and the expectations of the teachers and administrators who create them. In response to a question about the relative importance of various aspects of their schools, teachers at Valley responded:

Teacher 1: *...I think [our school's] personalized learning environment is the most important...*

Teacher 2: *I'd say most are entangled.*

Teacher 1: *Yeah.*

Teacher 3: *Yeah, I mean it's hard to take out high academic expectations.*

Teacher 1: *Because that's part of the personalized learning environment.*

Teacher 3: *Right.*

Teacher 2: *I mean, if you don't have [high academic expectations], you have nothing really.*

Teacher 1: *Right... it's like saying which is more important: the right leg or the left leg?*

Moderator: *You need them both to walk.*

Teacher 1: *Right.*

While personalization was a part of the SSC design, respondents' testimony suggests that the operation of strong personalized environments followed, in part, from the steps described above: 1) Principals established high expectations for teachers and a

clear mission/vision for the school, which focused on supporting all students toward graduation and success in college or work. 2) In turn, schools' founding teachers and administrators conveyed these expectations to students; schools hired teachers who believed in the shared mission/vision and who had the combination of hard and soft skills needed to create and maintain the type of personalized environment that would support students' success. 3) Working together, school staff established a personalized environment that valued students' social, emotional, and academic development, and that monitored students' progress in both areas. In essence, respondents described each of these factors as critical to the SSCs' success but insufficient on its own. The "magic" may lie in the way these strategies work together.

Educators also described two overarching areas of challenge related to these success factors. First, respondents highlighted inherent tensions in the design of small schools. For example, the small size of the schools partly facilitates personalization, which our interviewees reported was an important aspect of success. However, the size may also limit the number of advanced courses available for high-performing students and may place a substantial burden on teachers trying to fulfill multiple roles and responsibilities. Similarly, educators saw high academic expectations as essential to their work, but shared a fair amount of ambivalence over what high expectations should look like for their lower-performing students, especially as their schools have begun to serve more special education students and English Language Learners.

Thus, some aspects of the SSCs' design appear to be both vital to success and innately difficult to manage. In contrast, other elements of the SSC theory of action didn't necessarily pose major challenges, but were not seen to be valuable. For instance, many respondents reported that school themes were both poorly implemented and not of interest to most of their students.

Second, many of these SSC educators cited obstacles to sustaining success over the long run. They questioned whether the features that made them successful in the first place were deteriorating over time. For instance, founding teachers and principals explained that maintaining high expectations for staff and students was relatively easy at their school's outset, given the first cohort of teachers was often small, hand-picked by the principal, and comprised of individuals who had self-selected based on their interest in working in a small, personalized environment. However, respondents said that it became harder for schools to maintain these high expectations as the school grew, the staff became larger, and several founding teachers left. One of their concerns was the loss of school identity in the face of principal and teacher turnover.

Not only did they observe that turnover was disruptive to teachers and students, but it was also difficult to pass on elements of the culture and institutional knowledge that they saw as central to their success. In addition, educators cited the needs of a maturing staff, who could no longer work with the intensity that was common during the school's early years. As teachers' non-work-related responsibilities grew, school leaders felt pressure to foster a more balanced workload—in order to prevent burnout and even greater teacher turnover—but staff said these changes sometimes impaired school functioning. Lastly, the schools were contending with growth in their overall enrollment as well as an increase in the proportion of high-needs students. Thus, they reported that it was becoming more difficult to operate with the level of personalization they believed was responsible for their success.

Lessons for Schools and Districts

The successes of these schools and the challenges they face suggest some valuable lessons for the future:

- **Create enduring structures that promote relationships with students and their families:** The small number of students in SSCs certainly facilitated teachers' ability to build such relationships. But evidence suggests that these relationships were nurtured and strengthened by formal structures for staff and students to meet and discuss both academic and non-academic issues. Other schools can create similar structures by, for example, building smaller learning communities, providing opportunities for teachers to lead student advisories, and setting expectations around regular communication with families. Given the inevitability of some teacher turnover, it is important to establish structures that will endure when founding leaders and teachers move on. While respondents didn't talk explicitly about professional development in this area, it seems logical that in addition to building teacher capacity in a particular subject or providing training about new pedagogical strategies, schools should help their staff build the skills needed to cultivate positive relationships with students.
- **Establish more balanced work expectations over time:** While SSCs attributed much of their success to their teachers' willingness to go above and beyond, they simultaneously noted the burnout that can result. It may be that starting a new small school and operating it for the first few years is particularly labor intensive and that trying to sustain that level of effort has unintended consequences. Because high teacher turnover can have negative effects on

students and the school environment (Ronfeldt et al. 2012), SSCs should strategize about how to retain teachers without compromising on the core values that made them successful in the first place. One of the SSCs provided a strong example of this approach by setting limits on how long teachers could stay after school and by intentionally hiring teachers with external commitments and responsibilities, as a way to create a more balanced work culture.

- **Improve the fit between schools and external partners:** Respondents were not as enthusiastic about external partners as they were about other success factors. Rather than concluding that external partners are not valuable, we suggest two other, related interpretations of this finding. First, external partners are not a substitute for school-based staff, such as social workers and guidance counselors, who work with students on a daily basis and are tuned in with the culture and community of the school. As we saw in these SSCs, support staff are a key ingredient in creating a personalized environment and attending to students' needs outside of the classroom. Second, for external partners to make a difference, it is important that they be well integrated into the school community and address a compelling need that school staff aren't able to address. When the SSC partners were loosely related to the school's theme, for example, respondents didn't find them especially useful, but when partners provided a targeted service, especially around fostering student engagement and well-being, educators were more likely to describe the partners as contributing to their success. Additional research could identify the structures and strategies that help external partners add the most value to a school.
- **Measure other types of success at the school and district level:** These SSCs may also suggest the value of expanding current notions of accountability and what it means to be a successful or high-performing school. Interviewees were critical of policies that pressure them to "push" kids through to graduation and college before they are ready. These educators talked about defining success differently for different students (including some who may need six years to graduate), providing students with other life skills that might not show up on a standardized test, and preventing negative life outcomes, such as early pregnancy and incarceration. They also highlighted the importance of collecting a broad range of student data—on attendance, social and emotional well-being, coursework, etc.—to improve and differentiate instruction, track students' progress in real time, and intervene when necessary. The experience of these

SSCs seems to call for creating additional measures of success at the district level. In New York City, this might mean adding new items and placing more weight on the annual School Survey, which attempts to capture a range of information about students' experiences in schools.

Interviews with principals and teachers provided deep insight into the factors they see as central to their success, but questions remain about how representative their descriptions are and whether these particular factors can be linked empirically to improved academic outcomes. MDRC's next report, which will be released in early 2015, will help answer these questions by analyzing the results of a teacher survey conducted by the Research Alliance in a larger sample of 89 SSCs. The survey explored various aspects of each school's organization and operation. By tying the survey results to schools' graduation rates and other outcomes, this study may strengthen or challenge the conclusions presented in this report.

While there is no doubt that we can learn from the success of SSCs to date, further study is needed to discover whether and how the SSCs' success can be sustained, and whether the strategies they have employed are replicable in different settings. Certainly, it is encouraging that a large-scale reform of urban high schools could produce markedly better results for students.

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Notes to Table 1

Data sources for original table produced by MDRC (Bloom & Unterman 2013): Data on special education status and overage for grade status came from the 2010-2011 NYCDOE Progress Report. Data on race, free and reduced-price lunch status, English Language Learner status, average 10th grade class size, teachers with less than three years of experience, teachers with a master's plus a certificate, teachers teaching out of their certification, teacher turnover rate, and total school enrollment came from the 2010-2011 NYS Report Card. Data on student 8th grade reading and math tests scores were provided by the NYC DOE.

Notes:

^a Students are classified as “overage for 8th grade” if they were 14 years old or older on September 1 of their 8th grade school year.

^b Calculated by dividing the number of students who took the NY State 9th grade English Language Arts (ELA) exam by the number of 9th grade students at an ELA proficiency level of 1 or 2 at a given school. Results were averaged across all schools in the sample.

^c Same calculations as previous note, using 8th grade math test.

^d The number of teachers who taught in a school one given school year but not the next, divided by the total number of teachers in the first of those two school years, expressed as a percentage.

^e Calculated by taking the average of the average 10th grade class sizes for math, English, science, history, and social studies, from the 2010-2011 NYS Report Card.

Notes

¹ For information about New York City graduation rate trends prior to 1999, see

New York City Department of Education (2012). For information on graduation rates across the country, see Chapman et al. (2010).

² For an overview of the dropout crisis in the U.S., see Balfanz & Legters (2004).

³ The study, which is ongoing, utilizes a naturally occurring randomized controlled trial that is built into the DOE's high school choice and placement process. A recent paper by Abdulkadiroglu et al. (2013), used the same methodology employed by MDRC and found similar results.

⁴ The Regents exams are statewide subject tests administered in New York State. As of 2011, most NYC high school students must earn a Regents diploma to graduate. A Regents diploma requires that a student earns at least 44 course credits and score 65 or higher on the five required Regents exams: English, Math, Science, Global History, and US History.

⁵ Each NYC school belongs to a network of approximately 20 schools. The job of the network teams is to “support schools in meeting all of their instructional and operational needs while ensuring that schools can reach their accountability targets.” See

<http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/410CD054-2B4F-496B-AFF1-E84D7D4A297C/0/EmpowermentSchoolsbrochure.pdf>.

⁶ The DOE requires that school principals sign a consent form on behalf of their school prior to any attempted data collection in the school. Participation among individuals within the schools is voluntary.

⁷ In addition to these goals, the interview protocols also included questions about principals' and teachers' prior experience, how they came to work at the school, and their current roles and responsibilities.

⁸ See Bloom et al. (2010) for a discussion of a theory of action for SSC effectiveness.

⁹ The “teacher” category in the table only tallies responses that did not pertain to the role that teachers played in the other two success factors. Oftentimes respondents would begin to answer the open-ended question by describing, for example, how critical teachers were to the school’s success. As respondents continued, however, and responded to clarifying probes, it became clear that they were highlighting the role that teachers played in one or more of the other core success factors, such as creating or managing the school’s personalized learning environment. They further articulated the manner in which the environment was a primary mechanism for the school’s success rather than the teachers per se. In the table, this type of response is tallied in the “Personalization” category.

¹⁰ Pseudonyms have been used in place of school names.

¹¹ SMART Board is a series of interactive whiteboards developed by SMART Technologies.

¹² To earn an Advanced Regents Diploma, students must meet all the requirements of a Regents diploma (see note 4), and score 65 or higher on two additional Regents Examinations—one in a science and one in a language other than English.

¹³ Collaborative Team Teaching is a system in which one general education teacher and a special education teacher share a classroom, creating an “integrated service through which students with disabilities are educated with age appropriate peers in the general education classroom.” See http://www.nyclabschool.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=185483&type=d&pREC_ID=371937.

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